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EXPIATED.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

. VOL. II.

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1872

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BY THE

AUTHOR OF "BEHIND THE VEIL."

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CHAPTER I.

AS MRS. PONSONBY returned from her drive on the morning of which we wrote in the preceding chapter, she had also met Percy Delacombe. He had been able to leave Tenby sooner than he expected, and had alighted from the train at a station short of Swansea, and nearer to Trecoed than the latter; preferring to return home by the public footway, which, as already mentioned, ran at the foot of the castle-knoll.

Percy met the carriage as he was about to cross the stile into the park with this object. He exchanged greetings with Mrs. Ponsonby, and then struck into the path, arriving at the ruin some time after Alice had done so. Finding himself there, the associations connected with the spot inspired Percy, as they had done Alice herself, with the wish to revisit it. He accordingly quitted the footpath, and ascending the acclivity, reached the keep while Alice was still inside, and with the results above described.

Mrs. Ponsonby meanwhile had returned to Ceni-

arth, and should have employed herself in taking lunch. Alice, however, who was her usual companion at that meal,—Sir Edgar rarely appeared,—was not forthcoming; and, on enquiring for her, Mrs. Ponsonby found that she had gone out walking upwards of two hours previously. “In the direction of the castle,” her informant stated.

The castle!

The words set Mrs. Ponsonby’s vigilance, now attracted towards every circumstance which might favour the suspicion she had begun to entertain, on the alert at once. That was exactly the way he, Percy Delacombe, would be walking home, and much about the same time; could there have been any arrangement, any assignation between them?

Suspicious at the very least! Alice was most rarely absent from lunch; as far as Mrs. Ponsonby could recall, never had been absent before to-day: besides, she had been ailing; a lengthened walk was out of the question. Something else, too, suggested itself. Her meeting with the presumed lovers at that identical spot, and with some appearance of confusion on the part of one of them at least, some months previously: wholly forgotten by Mrs. Ponsonby, or nearly so, as long as there was no ulterior fact with which to connect it, but full of significance now that this was supplied!

Was it possible?

Had things fallen out so opportunely, that the espionage she had established, hitherto without any very definite results or what were capable of being produced as such to Sir Edgar, was now, by the

merest accident, on the point of leading to actual detection!

Mrs. Ponsonby trembled with eagerness and excitement.

A hasty lunch: Mrs. Ponsonby was too agitated to eat. Then she also put on her walking-dress, and started in the direction which Alice had pursued the same forenoon.

As she crossed the lawn, she was met by Sir Edgar, who had just come in from his ride.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Bertha?" asked the baronet.

"Merely for a walk, Edgar," answered Mrs. Ponsonby, who had no intention of disclosing her purpose unless it should result in success.

"You seem very enthusiastic about it," said Sir Edgar; "I had no idea that the exercise had such attractions for you. By the way," he added, "it is just as well that I met you. Don't you walk in that direction."

"What direction?" said Mrs. Ponsonby, following the motion of the baronet's hand, who pointed, as he spoke, in the line of some shrubberies; "do you mean towards the village?"

"Yes," answered Sir Edgar; "it is unsafe. Hatfield has been with me again this morning about that . . . about the bridge, you know; he came some weeks since, but I could not attend to it then. Now, he tells me that it is as much as any one's life is worth to cross it; the stream is so swollen with the rain that it is up to the planking,

and the piers are practically no support at all; the wood-work just rests upon them, but they are quite rotten."

"Ah! thank you for warning me," said Mrs. Ponsonby. "I was not going that way to-day, but it is as well to know. You will have it repaired, of course."

"Yes, I suppose so, some time or another," said the baronet. "I shall have a notice-board put up at once; there is no risk to our own people, as they all know it is out of repair, but strangers might meet with an accident. However," he continued, looking up at the sky, "I think it very likely that it will tell its own tale before to-morrow morning; the clouds seem collecting again, and another thunder-shower would settle the business. At present, Hatfield says, the stream is flowing quietly, and the weight of the planking enables it to hold its own; but if anything like a rush of water came, it would be swept away at once. But I am keeping you from your walk."

The speakers separated, and Mrs. Ponsonby proceeded at even a brisker pace than before, not only from her anxiety not to lose the chance which fortune seemed to have thrown in her way, but also from serious misgivings as to the weather. For some hour or two past the brilliancy of the morning had been overcast; as Sir Edgar had noticed, heavy masses of cloud were trailing up in more than one quarter; the wind, too, had risen, and eddied in fitful gusts, accompanied with the moaning sound which had already been the precursor of the late

stormy season. Mrs. Ponsonby bestirred herself accordingly.

On reaching the foot of the rising ground in front of the castle, Mrs. Ponsonby was so much out of breath that she was compelled to pause; deploring, as she did so, the loss of time thus occasioned, as well as the slackened pace at which she would be compelled to ascend the acclivity above her. To this latter task, however, after a minute or two of rest, she addressed herself with a good will.

Apparently, the exertion was rewarded. The spectacle which met Mrs. Ponsonby's eyes from the summit, and which, in her position there, she was enabled to observe without being seen herself, seemed at the first glance amply to compensate for that small trouble!

Facing her rose the castle-rock, with the mouldering keep upon it. Beneath this, in the depression between the two slopes, was the gateway already referred to, with the ruined cistern and stone bench at no great distance. And on the stone bench, half reclining and half seated, was Alice Brereton; not only in Percy's society, but under circumstances which afforded every presumption, on a superficial view, of the lover-like nature of their intercourse!

Unfortunately, as Mrs. Ponsonby quickly discovered, this was a first impression only; a closer scrutiny at once corrected it. Whatever might have passed at the interview which had presumably taken place before her arrival, it was palpable, even at the

distance at which she stood, that Alice's share in the matter was now wholly involuntary.

The swoon in which we left the latter, in fact, still continued, notwithstanding Percy's utmost exertions. Do what he would, Alice lay mute and insensible as ever; if anything, her exhaustion seemed to increase, the pulse beating more feebly every minute, the breath drawn at longer intervals and with greater effort.

Percy was in bitter despair. Was this a swoon only, or was it the precursor, perhaps the actual commencement, of some more fatal malady? Might not the over-wrought faculties, whether of mind or body, at length have given way; the heart, which had borne so much so uncomplainingly, broken down under its burden?

The thought was agony: Percy could not bear it. He leant over the rude bench on which he had placed Alice, and behind which he was himself standing, and kissed frantically, again and again, the pale cheek and brow which lay beneath him; "Alice," he exclaimed passionately, "Alice, come back to me!"

Mrs. Ponsonby saw the action, and heard Percy speak, but could not distinguish the words. But it was imperative to do so.

She crept down from her post of observation, and approached as near to the bench as she dared, masking her advance by some bushes which grew on the lower slope of the hill. The precaution indeed was unnecessary; half Swansea might have

been present, and Percy, in his bitter grief, would not have been aware of the fact; but Mrs. Ponsonby did not forego it, all the same.

Percy meanwhile continued to speak; and Mrs. Ponsonby, with every sense upon the alert, listened eagerly and intently.

All the more intently, because, as she did so, and notwithstanding the distance which she was compelled to maintain from the seat, and which made the greater part of what was said inaudible, some suspicion of the truth did now cross her mind. Some suspicion, that, as regarded Alice at all events, she had been absolutely mistaken; that, in lieu of the intrigue she believed herself to have detected, there had existed a self-devotion of which even Mrs. Ponsonby, although she could appreciate neither the motive nor the heroism, began now for the first time to surmise the possibility!

All the more intently on account of this suspicion. And with still augmented vigilance, when, side by side with it, there sprung up in her mind the resolution, that, be the truth what it might, she would not be thwarted by it; would not admit her disappointment. What! throw away the new chance which had dawned for her; dash to the ground the cup when it seemed brimming to her hand! And that too with facts, external facts, so singularly in her favour; needing only some easy legerdemain, the suppression of a circumstance here, the suggestion of one there, to make them answer all her purpose! Above all, to do this when, if the facts

could be so moulded, they would involve the entire discomfiture of the girl whom she hated!

No, indeed; it should not be! Even with the crudely developed line of action which was all that at the present had formed itself in Mrs. Ponsonby's brain, it should not be. Should not be from any consideration for Alice herself:—faugh! Mrs. Ponsonby abhorred all such Quixotisms! Should not be, even if there were any risk, as the few words she overheard showed there might be, of the mistake being, sooner or later detected, set right, laid at Mrs. Ponsonby's own door. She must run her chance of that.

So she sat, crouched in her lair like some creature of prey, and listened her best.

Percy, as we have said, continued speaking, although in broken sentences, often pausing to gaze on the unconscious form beside him; to press fresh kisses on the brow which apparently wore more and more the stamp of death. "Alice! Alice!" he exclaimed, in the bitterness of his self-reproach; "I have wronged you; have killed you by my violence, my frantic passion! Why did I shew myself, thrust myself into your presence at all, heartless idiot that I was! As if you had not had suffering enough without that, forcing yourself, for Léonie's sake, to write those cruel words which drove me from you, to secure her happiness by the shipwreck of your own; as if this was not sufficient burden for you without my adding to it! Alice, Alice, come back to me! I cannot cease to love you, but I will do all you re-

quire; carry out my engagement, hard as it will be, shut you out from my sight and speech, from everything but my thoughts; only come back to me! Come back!"

As Percy uttered the last words, almost with a cry of despair, he was overjoyed no less than surprised to observe that Alice's lips slightly parted; hitherto, from the moment when she had sunk to the ground, she had remained wholly motionless. Percy redoubled his efforts to recover her, and, at length, with some appearance of success. Either Alice had been roused by his voice, or the urgency of the attack had abated from other causes; at all events she now showed signs of returning animation. The face lost its extreme pallor; presently the lips moved again, and this time not without some sound escaping from them, although still too feebly to be articulate.

"Thank Heaven! thank Heaven!" Percy ejaculated fervently.

Meanwhile these symptoms of convalescence had been observed by other eyes. Mrs. Ponsonby detected them even before Percy had done so, and felt that she must come to some immediate decision. To remain where she was, was impossible; she would be at once seen when Percy moved. She must either come forward and offer her services as if she had just reached the spot, or retire undiscovered while she still might.

Mrs. Ponsonby adopted the latter course. Stealing up the rising ground as she had descended it, she recrossed the brow of the hill, and returned to

Ceniarth, although at a much slower pace than she had quitted it.

The interval, in fact, was busily occupied. She had quite decided what should be done so as to utilise the chance thrown in her way. Sir Edgar should be told of what had occurred. And, of course, so told as to produce the result which Mrs. Ponsonby wished; not the other and very opposite result which would have ensued from his knowing the actual facts.

But how was this to be done?

There was still that point for decision, and Mrs. Ponsonby pondered long over it. But before she had reached the house, that point was settled too.

Quite palpable, when the solution had once presented itself.

Some adroit manipulation of Percy's utterances had been Mrs. Ponsonby's first idea: even as the words which established Alice's innocence fell from his lips, the unseen listener, like a consummate advocate, had been considering how to employ them for an exactly opposite purpose. But in the course of her walk home she discarded this procedure for a much more obvious and easy one.

In Mrs. Ponsonby's own case, two senses had been employed; seeing and hearing. Now, let the facts, as ascertained by both these senses, be submitted to Sir Edgar, and Mrs. Ponsonby would have done her best to defeat her own purpose; would have permanently reconciled him, perhaps, to Alice, instead of confirming his morbid feeling towards her. But, let one sense only give its evidence; let

Sir Edgar see with Mrs. Ponsonby's eyes but not hear with her ears, and the results promised to be very different!

No lie this. Mrs. Ponsonby would not have told a lie, in express terms; literally, would not; nothing would have induced her to do so. Be the character what it may, most minds retain some well-worn fragments of conscience; something, somehow or other, which will not tolerate direct, open rebellion against right, although it will connive at the end being attained in another way.

No, every word Mrs. Ponsonby uttered should be strictly true; she had her own self-respect to maintain. But, as regarded her hearer, the effect produced should correspond, not to Mrs. Ponsonby's convictions, but to her wishes; it should not be her fault if the latter were not fully gratified.

This further question accordingly was so adjusted, leaving for discussion one more point only; the precise time when, and place in which, Mrs. Ponsonby's communication should be made to Sir Edgar. This she also debated at some length during her walk, notwithstanding obvious indications of the approach of the storm which had been gathering during the forenoon: and she found some difficulty in coming to a decision.

But chance took the decision out of her hands.

CHAPTER II.

ON entering the house, Mrs. Ponsonby had meant to retire to her own room in the first instance, with the object of arranging her ideas and organising some settled plan for the proposed interview. As she ascended the staircase however for that purpose, she encountered Sir Edgar, who was coming down.

Mrs. Ponsonby was exceedingly flushed, a nervous excitement perceptible in her whole appearance and manner. Sir Edgar stopped her, and enquired the cause, not without some kindness in his tone. "Was she unwell? She had been walking too fast perhaps, had over-exerted herself; he had some suspicion of it when they met an hour or two back. She should be careful not to bring on one of those attacks against which Dr. Cooper had warned her."

As Sir Edgar spoke, a sudden thought struck his listener. Here was the opportunity, the golden chance; why let it slip? It might not occur a second time so easily; might never recur. Let her seize it while she might!

"I *am* excited, Edgar," said his sister-in-law, "greatly so; greatly troubled. Not from being over-fatigued though, but by something which I have just become acquainted with."

"Indeed!" said the baronet. "What has happened?"

"Nothing happened," said Mrs. Ponsonby. "Nothing, perhaps, which you may think I need have communicated to you, although I hardly like not to do so. It is a most painful subject. May we come into your library?"

"By all means," said Sir Edgar. And they withdrew to that apartment accordingly.

Although it was still early in the afternoon, there was little light in the room; a sombre one at all times, and rendered still more gloomy at present by the masses of cloud with which the sky was now covered, and from which an occasional roll of thunder was already heard in the distance. Mrs. Ponsonby however had no objection to the *chiaro oscuro* of the library; it suited her purpose. She was aware that there might be some difficult ground to travel over in the conversation which was to ensue with her brother-in-law, and it was as well that her own face should not be too open to his perusal.

Sir Edgar stirred the fire into a blaze, and placed a chair for his visitor. As he did so, a flash of lightning, vivid enough to show that the storm was rapidly advancing, darted into the room from outside; the thunder which accompanied it, and which was louder and closer than the previous peals, was followed by a heavy downpour of rain.

"You are home just in time, Bertha," said Sir Edgar.

"Yes," said Mrs. Ponsonby; "I hardly noticed

the weather, though, and I suppose they didn't either."

"They! who? Whom do you mean?" asked the baronet.

"Well, really, Edgar," said Mrs. Ponsonby, "I think, on reflection you had better not know; it may make you angry perhaps, and I don't suppose that it can be helped now. I am sure I wish I had never gone out myself; never gone near the place."

"Near what place?" asked Sir Edgar, impatiently: "for goodness sake do speak out, Bertha. What is it that you are so unusually excited about?"

"Well, Edgar," said Mrs. Ponsonby, "if I must tell you, it is about Alice."

Sir Edgar's brow darkened. "Alice!" he echoed: "what about her?"

Mrs. Ponsonby affected to hesitate. "I am so afraid of telling you," she said.

"I insist upon your doing so, Bertha, and doing it at once," said Sir Edgar.

"Well then," said Mrs. Ponsonby, "only this, that I am afraid somehow that . . . that we have been deceived in her."

"Deceived!" Sir Edgar again repeated; "what do you mean? I may not have been able to overcome some unhappy associations in regard to Alice," he added, almost with a shudder, "but I have confidence in herself personally."

"You had the same in her mother once," said Mrs. Ponsonby, gently. "Edgar," she continued, "I know I am a hard, cold woman in some things; but, believe me, in this matter, you have my genuine

sympathy; you had it in that former trouble. And mind, I do not mean to say there is anything exactly of that kind; not at present, at all events. What might . . ."

"At present!" exclaimed Sir Edgar, interrupting the speaker; "at present! Do you mean that, present or future, there is disgrace hanging over us; the Brereton name to be dragged through the mire over again?"

"I hope not," said Mrs. Ponsonby; "I am a Brereton myself by alliance. However, you shall be the judge. The fact is . . . can you bear to hear something very unpleasant, Edgar?"

"Go on, go on," Sir Edgar exclaimed.

"Well, then," continued Mrs. Ponsonby, who had expressly calculated on the effect which the delays in her narrative would have upon the temperament of her hearer, "the fact is that Alice has been conducting herself rather oddly of late; in one particular quarter, that is. There is something, or rather a good deal, going on behind the scenes between her and young Mr. Delacombe."

"*What!*" exclaimed the baronet, starting up from his seat with a fierce gesture. "What!"

"Edgar, do calm yourself," said Mrs. Ponsonby; "you frighten me; I cannot go on unless you sit down."

Sir Edgar complied, clenching his hands tightly as he did so. Mrs. Ponsonby proceeded.

"I have suspected something of the kind for a long time past," she continued; "almost from the time when Léonie returned to us, after accepting

Mr. Delacombe. Poor girl! she seems quite unconscious of it, fortunately; but I certainly noticed this, almost in the first weeks of their engagement. Of course, Mr. Percy was a good deal here; and although he affected not to see much of Alice, and perhaps did not then, yet there was an evident understanding between them; it was impossible not to observe, whenever they did meet, that he was thinking much more of her than of the girl he was engaged to. It was this which first attracted my attention to it."

"And why . . . why did you not tell me?" asked Sir Edgar, passionately. Strong as his self-control usually was, it gave him no support now. Half-an-hour hence, probably, he would recover himself and be the stern, rigidly just arbiter of right and wrong once more; but at present he was a mere puppet in the hands of the woman who was playing with him. "Why did you not tell me all this?" he asked again.

"Well, you see, Edgar," said Mrs. Ponsonby, with a half-smile, "there are some things which a woman knows quite certainly, but of which she can produce no positive proof; none which would be satisfactory to a man's mind, especially one like yourself, who is accustomed to think clearly and forcibly upon all subjects. Besides, I really did, really did hope that, whatever it was, it might not go on; just be a passing flirtation merely. You see, Alice and he were much together when they were children, and although he had forgotten old times, she might not; she is an . . . an impressionable girl,

you know, and if she let him see this, why, of course, you couldn't blame a young man very much. He and Léonie would be married in a few weeks, and then there would be an end of it. That was what I thought; thought and hoped up to to-day; but... Dear me, what a clap that was; didn't you hear it, Edgar? And how the rain is coming down!"

"Psha, never mind the rain," said Sir Edgar. "You were saying something about to-day."

"Why, yes," said Mrs. Ponsonby, "I regret to say that she and Mr. Percy Delacombe have been together to-day under circumstances which makes it pretty clear that she intends to be Mrs. Percy;—at least, I hope she does. Keep in your chair, Edgar; I shall stop instantly if you do not."

Again her hearer obeyed; perhaps with less difficulty this time. The self-mastery was coming back to him. The calm in the cyclone, more appalling than its worst rage; indignation substituted for passion, choice and reflection for unthinking violence!

Mrs. Ponsonby resumed.

"It was only this afternoon," she said, "only just now; it was that which made me so excited when I came in. When you met me after lunch, I was starting for a walk, you remember; the weather has kept us quite prisoners lately, and as I had no idea the day would turn off so, I thought I should enjoy one."

"You started in the direction of the castle ruins," said Sir Edgar.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Ponsonby; "and I heartily wish I had gone in some other. Although perhaps

it was best, after all: they might have continued it after to-day, and then most likely other people would have seen it besides myself. It was a pretty public place, too; pretty unblushing; the seat by the old broken-down well there."

"And what did you see?" asked Sir Edgar, sternly.

"Oh! well, Edgar, of course, nothing improper," said his sister-in-law, with a half-smile again, "else I should not have been able to tell you: nothing improper, that is, if he had not been engaged to another young lady. Just a little love-making, that is all. She was leaning back on the bench there, and he was leaning over the back of it kissing her; nothing more. Of course, it looked peculiar, under the circumstances; especially, as I said, the place being so public. Any of the people from the ale-house just above there might have come by and seen them; anybody, in fact: the path is a good deal used, you know."

Sir Edgar set his teeth firmly, but said nothing aloud. He only muttered to himself, "Fool that I was not to have foreseen this! fool! fool!" Mrs. Ponsonby went on.

"Such things are matters of taste," she said, "and I suppose my romantic days are past. Still, even if they had been lawfully engaged, it did occur to me that Sir Edgar Brereton's daughter might have selected a less frequented spot for the purpose; it would be rather a good story in the county:—don't grind your teeth like that, Edgar, please, it makes one's flesh creep. I thought at first of coming forward and saying something," Mrs. Ponsonby con-

tinued, "but I hardly knew how it might be taken; young people are so independent about such matters now-a-days, so different altogether to what they were in my growing up; girls didn't allow their lovers quite such freedoms then."

"What do you mean by 'allow?'" asked Sir Edgar, speaking at last, and in a tone now of perfect calmness, although terrible from the force he was putting upon himself; "am I to understand that Alice was permitting this; taking it patiently?"

"Oh! quite patiently; in the most resigned way," said Mrs. Ponsonby. "Mind," she continued, with an expressive shrug of her shoulders, "that I do not say it was anything worse than this, Edgar; mind that."

"Worse!" exclaimed Sir Edgar, with an expression of bitter contempt.

"Well, it certainly was bad," said his companion. "Bad for us all, but especially for poor Léonie; it was that which made me think of telling you, the feeling what a blow it will be to her when it all comes out. You see, it is a blow in every way; she has not only given her heart to Mr. Delacombe, but, with his position, it is the loss of such an excellent match for her, poor girl. In fact, that is what makes it so shameful in Alice; such wanton cruelty, I call it. If Mr. Delacombe's fortune had been any object to her, there might have been some excuse for this, some motive at any rate; but as she will succeed to your property in any case, . . ."

"She will not do that," said Sir Edgar, rising

from his seat, and speaking with even greater calmness than before. During the latter portion of the interview he had apparently been making up his mind in regard to some point; the process seemed now complete, and all traces of the agitation which had preceded it were externally quite effaced. "I think now, Bertha, I will ask you to leave me," he continued; "some matters of business will arise out of this which I shall attend to this afternoon. It is still early, is it not? Yes, four o'clock only, I see. We shall meet at dinner-time."

Mrs. Ponsonby withdrew accordingly, and Sir Edgar, thus left alone, paced up and down the library for some minutes, speaking rapidly to himself as he did so, as if giving vent to the excitement which he had suppressed during his sister-in-law's visit.

"Patiently!" he ejaculated bitterly, repeating his own question to Mrs. Ponsonby; "Yes, 'quite patiently,'" she said. Putting up her face to be kissed, it seems; kissed by that young scoundrel; his arm round her, I daresay; just the mother over again, although even she would not have chosen a parish thoroughfare; I will do her that justice. Vile girl! And to think of the struggle, the suffering I have gone through all these years, forcing myself to accept her as a child of mine when every feeling I had revolted against it! Quite explained now: if I had not been an utter fool I might have seen this earlier. It was instinct, no doubt, which was warning me all the time; warning me that, if I did take her to my heart she would play the same game over

again on the first opportunity: it runs in the blood, they say, that sort of thing. And her infamous, infamous treatment of Léonie too, whom she pretended to be so fond of! Faugh!

“Well,” Sir Edgar continued, pausing in one of the long strides with which he was traversing the apartment, and speaking still in the same bitter tone, “Well, if it is to be, it must be; I wash my hands of the whole thing. Only, it shall not be in this house; if the family are to be disgraced, made the public talk of the neighbourhood again, it shall not be at Ceniarth; that I am quite resolved. ‘Succeed to the estates,’ did Bertha say?—Something very much short of that, I could have told her. She shall have food and clothes, wretched girl; have what that other woman had. But not as an inmate under this roof. Let her go where she pleases and with whom she pleases; I am clear of her. As to the estates, that is soon settled: I will send for Jones and his clerk at once: if poor Léonie has lost her lover she shall have that compensation, at all events.”

As Sir Edgar spoke, he rang the bell and desired that the carriage should be at once sent in to Swansea, to fetch the solicitor whom he had named. “When Miss Brereton returns,” he added, “request her to come to me here at once, if you please.” The servant withdrew with his orders, and Sir Edgar then sat down at the library table, and occupied himself, or endeavoured to do so, with some details of the arrangement which the altered disposition of his property would necessitate.

CHAPTER III.

WE return to the two persons who had given rise to the agitating scene of the last chapter, and of whose proceedings intermediately some account must here be given.

Alice recovered from her swoon slowly, although more entirely than Percy Delacombe had ventured to hope. As soon as she was able to realise what had happened, Alice rose and again endeavoured to quit the spot, declining at first the arm which Percy offered her. Her weakness, however, was still too great to permit of her walking home alone, and she was compelled to accept his offer.

Meanwhile, the storm mentioned a few pages back had rolled up, and the torrents of rain which fell rendered it impossible for them to proceed for some time. They were still within reach of the gateway leading up to the keep, and took shelter there during the worst violence of the storm; a period of nearly an hour. Little was said between them, the feelings of both being too painfully moved to allow of conversation. Percy, respecting Alice's expressed wish no less than her weakness, abstained from pressing his suit in any manner; and she herself made no reference to it. She thanked him, simply and kindly, for his assistance during her swoon, and then both relapsed into silence.

Percy arranged an overcoat which he had with him on a stone coping inside the gateway, and of this seat Alice gladly availed herself, Percy standing by her side; here they remained listening to the thunder, which rolled heavily among the hills, and the splash of the rain on the broken masonry and sward outside.

Their detention at length came to an end, and Alice, who was rested by the delay, assured Percy of her ability now to return to Ceniarth alone. He reluctantly consented, and Alice then started, again offering him her hand as she did so. "It is for ever," she said. "God bless you, Percy; forgive me the pain and sorrow I have caused you."

Percy took the hand in both his own, and once more pressed it fervently to his lips. Alice then slowly re-ascended the rising ground beyond, and was lost to sight. She had begged Percy not to follow her; and after watching her across the brow, he also left the spot, and resumed his walk homewards.

The storm had entirely ceased by this time; a few drops still fell at intervals, but the greater portion of the sky was clear, the masses of cloud which had occupied it being now piled together on the horizon, where the January sun was already sinking in a red glow. Percy pursued his way slowly towards the vicarage, frequently pausing, as some memory of a more painful character than those which had preceded it forced itself upon him.

It was in one of these pauses that he became conscious of a singular delusion, as it seemed. His

mind was strung to the highest pitch by the scene through which he had just passed, and he had walked in a kind of dream, in which the agitating conversation between Alice and himself, the terror inspired by her swoon, and the dreary hour which they had passed, almost in silence, under the ruined gateway, mingled confusedly with the sounds to which he had been listening while standing there. But now, one of these sounds assumed an unaccountable prominence. Difficult to believe, notwithstanding all evidence of his senses to the contrary, that it was not still thundering!

This became still more perplexing as Percy, shortly after he first noticed this sound, crossed a high ridge between the Ceniarth grounds and the road to the vicarage. His progress had been so slow that more than an hour had elapsed since he quitted Alice, and by this time every speck of cloud had disappeared; yet, there was the thunder still audible.

Not so much like thunder, either, now that he came to consider the matter. More like some heavy mass in motion: a rush and boom with it, like a train approaching at great speed, had there been any line in that direction.

Closer and closer still now. The boom louder and louder. Something which Percy had never heard before, he thought, excepting at sea.

At sea! Hold; could it be? Yes, of course; water unquestionably!

Percy's conjecture was right; the fact indeed became patent almost in the same instant. The

storm had fallen with unusual violence on some high moorlands above them, and the smaller streams of these, already swollen with the previous rains, were now discharging themselves in one mass down the main outfall of the district; the valley which lay between Ceniarth house and the village. The valley, as Percy now recollected, in which there was a private bridge communicating between the two.

He trembled for a moment. He had heard, some weeks before, untoward rumours about this bridge; it was reported to be in a precarious condition, if not absolutely unsafe:—was it in any way possible that Alice might be there?

No; quite impossible. It lay in a direction exactly opposite to that which she had followed on leaving him, and there was of course no likelihood of her having again left the house after reaching home.

No; Alice was undoubtedly safe. No special risk to any one, happily, excepting such as might be involved in the actual transit of the bridge; and that was unlikely to be attempted on such an afternoon.

Still, for all this, Percy stood and watched. From the point of view which he occupied, the structure itself was out of sight; but he could see the valley for half-a-mile or so above it. And he had not long to wait.

Down the flood came. Not filling the valley from side to side, as it might have done in a mountainous district; the height in the interior was not sufficient for that. Not, again, with extreme velocity.

But still, in a collected, steady mass, which struck out of its way such obstacles as intervened with a force like that of a sledge-hammer!

It went by almost in an instant, nothing remaining to attest its passage excepting some uprooted trees and fragments of broken fences; objects which were either hurried rapidly down the stream, or floated more tranquilly on the lake-like surface into which its waters, already swollen to the brim, and charged in the rear by the impetuous torrent which had just descended upon them, had in more than one place converted the flat meadow-lands adjoining. Occupied as he was with his own painful subjects of thought, Percy stood and gazed upon this spectacle for some minutes. The details we have described were too striking to be overlooked; while in the desolation which met his eye he read an image of that which had fallen on his own hopes and prospects.

The evening however was now closing in, and Percy resumed his walk homewards. Long before he reached the vicarage, the scene which he had recently witnessed was forgotten in his reflections on the still more agitating occurrences which had preceded it.

It remains to be seen how it had fared with others in the meanwhile.

We left Sir Edgar in the library at Ceniarth, endeavouring to occupy himself with some business arrangements connected with the alteration he proposed making in his will.

The attempt however was wholly unsuccessful.

Do what he would, he could not fix his mind definitely upon any subject whatever; still less frame the instructions which would be necessary for his lawyer's guidance. Time after time, he took the pen in his hand and dipped it in the ink; but, instead of writing, he remained absorbed in agitating thought.

So absorbed, that when some one knocked lightly at the library-door, about half-an-hour after Mrs. Ponsonby had left him, Sir Edgar did not hear it: he had forgotten for the moment that he had directed Alice to be sent to him there. The knock was repeated, however, and this at once recalled him to himself. He was the hard, unmoved man again immediately, and the voice in which he bade his visitor enter was free from excitement of any kind.

Alice began to explain why she came, but Sir Edgar stopped her. "You will not speak, Miss Brereton, if you please," he said: "I have half-a-dozen words to say to you, and then our connection will terminate altogether."

"Papa!" exclaimed Alice, in equal surprise and terror.

A contraction, almost a spasm, passed over Sir Edgar's face as Alice spoke, but he controlled himself by a strong effort.

"Neither Papa, nor father in future, Miss Brereton," said Sir Edgar. "You are past twenty-one, so that you have no longer even a legal claim upon me; I might cast you out of doors on the spot, as we do such offal; rid myself of you altogether. I

shall do so, except as regards making some provision for your actual wants; the particulars of this I have not yet settled, but shall have done so by to-morrow. For this evening you will remain in your own room, if you please; what you require will be sent you there."

"What . . . what have I done?" asked Alice, wonderingly. Although, even as she did so, the recollection of what had passed that afternoon; a sense of shame, almost of guilt, at the avowal which Percy had heard from her own lips; a recollection of the passionate scene which had followed, blameless as her own share in it had been, overwhelmed her with confusion, and flushed into cheek and brow a tinge of the deepest crimson. Sir Edgar sat and watched her.

"I see that you are quite capable of supplying the answer to your question yourself," he said, "and therefore think it unnecessary to do so. I forbear either to make any comment upon the occurrence: to a young lady of such distinguished piety it might be painful to be told in plain words what society thinks of her. There are some pretty plain ones, however, in your own books of devotion; the Bible, for instance, as you illogically call it; apply to yourself two or three of the hardest things which are said about your sex there, and they will fairly meet the case. Fairly meet it; not quite perhaps. My acquaintance with the work in question is only superficial, but I certainly do not recall there anything quite of the same complexion; any sketch of female character which so successfully combines

certain personal qualities which I will not shock your delicacy by repeating, with quite so much perfidy and meanness."

"Papa!" exclaimed Alice, almost fiercely. But her tone softened in the same instant, and she added, in a low, broken voice, "May God forgive you, Papa; forgive you, and help me. I am wholly innocent of what you seem to charge me with."

Once again Sir Edgar was shaken for the moment, as he had been in that former interview; arrested in his purpose, well-nigh thrust back from it, by the truth and purity of the face which confronted him, in its just anger, with a firmness resembling his own. Was it possible that the qualities there written in eye and brow could co-exist with the baseness he had supposed? Might there not be some mistake, some explanation?

Once again Sir Edgar felt this. And once again that unhappy memory in the past undid all; that fatal likeness! Plainer, if possible, than even when he had before noticed it!

Alice's last words had in fact been uttered, not only in a softened tone, but with some return of the confused look she had worn a few minutes before; partly due, as then, to her agitating recollection of what had taken place between herself and Percy, and partly, and principally, to sheer exhaustion. The walk home, notwithstanding her assurance to Percy, had overtaxed her remaining strength, and it was with difficulty that she still continued standing; her limbs trembling violently under her as she did so.

"Just so," Sir Edgar thought, "just so had that other woman stood shivering, almost crouching before him; the same manner, half shame-stricken, half imploring; the same look in eye and feature! Visible enough now."

Yes: fatally visible.

Fatally; as within the beholder died out gentle ruth and pity, or such capacities for them as his nature still retained. While in their place, linked through his own fault with that unhappy likeness, came, as it had come in his wife's case, but with tenfold force now from years of acted cruelty, the remorseless, relentless purpose.

And still more fatally, as another, although unseen agent, took its place in the drama.

The alastor, the crime-prompter. The fatal visitant of his race; an agent in the moral creed of Paganism, permitted, it may be, to exert power over one who had apostatised from a better faith!

From its haunt by the river-side it came, through the dusk twilight, along the whispering reed and sedge, summoned by the man's mercilessness. Suggesting to him its still deeper shades; sealing on his heart the foreseen doom. Awaiting its time to suggest and seal, but awaiting it with easy patience;—for the time was close at hand now!

In the momentary revulsion of feeling which Sir Edgar had undergone, he had made no reply to Alice's last words: but he did so now. Still in the same taunting tone as before. If possible, with increased bitterness.

"You are charity itself, Miss Brereton," he said;

“your desire that I may be forgiven is most saintly. I only regret that my unregenerate nature,—that is the phrase, I believe, is it not?—should be unable to respond to it. Meanwhile, we will close this interview if you please: you will retire upstairs as I requested, and to-morrow I will make arrangements for your withdrawal to a still greater distance; where you choose, in fact: Ceniarth is unworthy to retain so eminent a professor. Hold, though,” he added, as Alice, broken down in spirit and strength alike, was about to leave the room without further reply; “I think a different arrangement may be required. Léonie is coming home early to-morrow, she writes; possibly this evening; and much as she might profit by your Christian example, I am not altogether disposed that she should make the experiment. Ah! I see you have your walking-dress on still. Instead of going to your room, you will walk across to the village, if you please, to your nurse’s, Mrs. Reynold’s; you can pass the night there. There will be plenty of light along the road, and some things will be sent after you. Good evening.”

For some minutes after Alice left him Sir Edgar remained seated at his writing-table, as he had been throughout the above conversation. But he could not stop there longer. The powerful self-command which he had exerted during this interview, as well as in that which had previously taken place with Mrs. Ponsonby, was followed, now that the necessity for it was over, by a proportionate reaction; and the full vehemence of Sir Edgar’s nature showed itself.

He strode up and down the room in fierce passion; at one time recalling the outrage put upon him by Lady Brereton's flight, the circumstances of which were as fresh to his mind as if they had occurred the day previously; at another, comparing Alice's supposed offence with it, setting the disgrace and perfidy of the latter in the strongest light, and with every feeling of aggravation.

Gradually his heart became very bitter against her. Some measure of scorn, of contempt, had mingled with his feelings on first hearing Mrs. Ponsonby's details, and these he had reproduced in his conversation with Alice. But he regretted it now. Why had he dealt with her thus lightly: why jested with her, bitter as the jest had been? That his daughter, a Brereton, the inheritor of the name which he had been at such pains to raise from its decadence and which she had now abased in the dust again, should have acted as she had;—was this a thing to be visited with sarcasm only? Sir Edgar chafed under the thought.

Then, again, the punishment he had inflicted, even that which he still contemplated; Alice's dismissal from home, her deprivation of the property which she was so unfit to possess; was this adequate to the offence? Small punishment that, for a girl who partook of her mother's qualities! She would live on pleasantly enough to herself, half saint, half sinner; throw herself into Percy Delacombe's arms—aye, yes, as his paramour, no doubt, if he would not take her on any other terms; become the talk

of the county, as Mrs. Ponsonby had said. "Would that she had died first!" Sir Edgar exclaimed in his frenzy of passion; "would that she were dead now; it would be a mercy to her, a mercy to us all! Why did I stay my hand, when she stood before me just now, cowering in her shame and infamy? Shrink from it, did I? Yes, and I should do the same, I suppose, even if the opportunity were given me, if the axe or the cord were placed in my very reach! Pitiful weakness! As if these so-called instincts could outweigh that higher sense of truth and right: as if the parent's hand should not be first against the child who could act as she has done!"

Numerous and agitating as were the reflections which thus suggested themselves to the speaker, they succeeded each other too rapidly to occupy much time; disturbing the balance of reason and judgment probably all the more upon that account. Who has not experienced something of the kind, although in a far different degree; the heated state in which the mind, dwelling exclusively on one painful thought, exaggerates its importance and the action which is to be adopted in reference to it, until the conclusions become almost those of the monomaniac? Let a man beware of the hour when this occurs. Let it be to him one of fear. Of self-abasement. Of any agent which may control the forces thus brought into play; may prevent their working on, as in some natures and under special circumstances they will do, to an irretrievable issue! It was while his passion was thus at its highest

that Sir Edgar's attention was again diverted by matter external to his own thoughts.

Fronting him where he sate was one of the sash windows of the library, and Sir Edgar, without any special purpose in doing so, was looking through this; his eyes fixed on a portion of the lawn which lay beyond it, skirted by some shrubberies. Scarcely distinguishable, indeed, these objects. It was not pitch dark yet, far from it; but the pall of night was beginning to settle down upon the scene; confusing; distorting; bewildering.

Quite without purpose it was that Sir Edgar sat looking out of this window. For several minutes, that is to say. Then, something did show itself on the lawn which riveted his gaze intently enough; driving the blood back to his heart as it did so!

Alice Brereton!

In the extremity of her weakness and terror at the late interview, Alice had been for some time physically incapable of obeying the order Sir Edgar had given her. She had now recovered herself enough to do so, and was proceeding towards the village, as he had directed. She had already advanced some distance; little beyond the outline of the figure could be seen: but that it was Alice was palpable enough.

But what was 'she doing there; there, on the lawn? He had ordered her to go to her nurse's, but of course he intended she should follow the main road there; he had expressly mentioned it, he remembered. But this way, the way she was taking, was the footpath, not much shorter, and at

that hour of the evening hardly safe in parts. Then there was the stream to be crossed, and . . . Good Heaven! the bridge! He had forgotten that!

For one moment the strong instinct of nature rose in the father's heart, in spite of his stoicism. Sir Edgar hastily unfastened the sash, and threw it up, or rather attempted to do so. Let him spring out; fly to save, to detain her: there was ample time yet!

But the window resisted his pressure. Swollen with the damp perhaps. Perhaps some other trifling accident: what signifies?

It moved slightly, very slightly upwards; then it stopped. And the instinct, checked in its first action, died away for ever.

Not under the influence of that "higher sense" of which he had spoken; a mere name that was, one of the many sophistries which he habitually palmed off on himself. No, there were more powerful agents at work. Back swept the tide of passion, the mortified pride, the self-will, the stern determination to bend everything to his own purpose, to strike from his path whatever would not bend; the mercilessness, fanatic in its justice, sheltering its violence under the plea of a self-imposed necessity!

Sir Edgar shuddered, in spite of himself; he knew whom he had to deal with now! The alastor stood, as it were, face to face with him; confronting him in the murky shadows of the twilight, in the whirl and surging of the stream, which were plainly audible in the distance; yes, in that other sound

still more distant, but which he also heard as Percy had done, the boom of the advancing flood behind it. Confronting him; daring him to gainsay it; alleging against him his own compliance in past years; binding this on him, like the cords on a struggling man, in the stern compulsion of the present!

Struggling, but for a few seconds only; the struggle for life and death! Then the antagonist prevailed.

Sir Edgar shut down the sash again. Bolted it. Drew blind and curtain in front of it. Moved to a part of the room where he could not see it, even thus defended from view. Not that that was required indeed; had the window stood wide open he could not have seen Alice in the growing darkness now; Sir Edgar knew that well enough himself. But he chose to have these further obstacles in the way, all the same.

He then stood for a minute or two listening; the sounds still troubled him: the rush of the stream, and that other, less distinguishable, but still rapidly advancing sound. He did not care to leave the room, somehow, but he tried to exclude these; flung himself on a couch at the other end of the library and pressed both hands on his ears.

"What have I to do with it?" he exclaimed, fiercely as he did so. "It may not be so at all, how can I tell? the thing has stood all these years and may certainly stand half-an-hour longer! And if it should not, is that my concern? Her blood is on her own head! Let it be so; let it be so; one

fault of the kind has been expiated there already, and why not hers? Let her die; let her hide her shame there; best so. No publicity as yet, no open scandal; it was avenged in the other case, but it will be prevented here; prevention is best. All destined, no doubt; destined that she should act thus; destined that she should suffer for it,—if she does suffer: let it take its chance! Psha! how dark it is: I must have the lamp in."

CHAPTER IV.

SOME two or three hours have passed.

Mrs. Ponsonby is in her own room, to which she retired on leaving her brother-in-law, and where she became speedily absorbed in earnest and, on the whole, not displeasing reflection.

Mrs. Ponsonby was, in fact, well satisfied with the afternoon's work. Her recent interview with Sir Edgar, in particular, seemed to promise entire success. His concluding words made it almost certain that, thanks to the unexpected incident of the afternoon, and to the adroit use she had made of it, one portion of her project would be speedily realised, and the succession of the Ceniarth estates be secured to Léonie in place of Alice.

The speculations thus suggested were so engrossing that Mrs. Ponsonby had been wholly unconscious of the lapse of time: she had lighted candles soon after entering the room, but neither perceived how low they had burnt in the interval, nor the progress made by the hands of the clock which fronted her on the mantelpiece. Even the arrival of the dinner-hour, which at Ceniarth was seven, and which usually possessed for Mrs. Ponsonby a lively interest, failed on the present occasion to divert her thoughts from the topic with which they were occupied.

When however the clock at length pointed to half-past seven, Mrs. Ponsonby became suddenly conscious of the fact; and at the same time aware that she was practising an involuntary and unwonted abstinence. She rang accordingly and enquired the cause of the delay.

"I was just coming up, ma'am, if you please," said the servant who appeared, "to ask if you knew anything about Miss Alice?"

"Miss Brereton?" repeated Mrs. Ponsonby, who in her castle-building for the future had for the moment forgotten the part which Alice had played in furthering it; "no; what about her? Is anything the matter?"

"Not that I know of, ma'am," answered the girl, "only we can't find her anywhere. She came in between four and five, and one of the men saw her crossing the hall afterwards to go out again; but she have not come back yet."

"Really!" said Mrs. Ponsonby, in genuine surprise. Of the details of the interview between Alice and Sir Edgar she had of course no knowledge, and was puzzled to account for the former being absent from home at so late an hour.

Could it be some further meeting with Mr. Percy Delacombe? No, quite impossible, Mrs. Ponsonby felt, after what she had overheard between them that morning. Still, the circumstance was perplexing.

"They don't quite know what to do, ma'am," continued the servant. "Norris hardly likes to have up the dinner before Miss Alice comes in, at least

without asking Sir Edgar; and he is ever so busy writing in the library and said particularly he was not to be disturbed."

"I had better go down to him," said Mrs. Ponsonby. And she went accordingly.

Sir Edgar was again seated at the table when his sister-in-law entered; certainly not writing, although he took up his pen mechanically on seeing her. She was struck by his haggard look, and by a restless expression in the face which was not natural to it; quite different from his sustained calmness a few hours before.

"I am afraid you are not well, Edgar," said Mrs. Ponsonby; "indeed, I cannot wonder at it; the circumstances which it was unhappily my duty to mention to you just now must have been most trying to you."

"I am well enough," said Sir Edgar abruptly. "There is no . . . no news of her, is there?"

"Of Alice, do you mean?" asked his visitor. "Why, no; I should think there had been news enough for one day. However, it is about her I came to speak. She seems to have gone out two or three hours since and not to have come back yet: they do not know whether to bring up dinner. It is singular that she should be out so late," continued Mrs. Ponsonby, recurring to the thought which had suggested itself to her, although only to be discarded, a few minutes before, but which it occurred to her now might possibly help to clinch the afternoon's work; "it is singular, and rather alarming. She may have had some further assignation

with Mr. Delacombe; gone away with him altogether, perhaps. One doesn't know."

"She will be free to do so if she likes now," said Sir Edgar, recovering for a moment the stern feelings by which he had been actuated during his interview with Alice, but which had been considerably shaken by his solitary musings in the interval.

"Free to do so? How do you mean?"

"Free to go with him or any one else," said Sir Edgar; "I wash my hands of her. As to her absence at present, that is in consequence of my orders. I had intended her to remain here for a day or two, until some arrangement could be made for her future residence, as I do not choose her to be domesticated at Ceniarth any longer. As Léonie was coming home however, I changed my mind and sent her down to the village to her nurse's; she will stop there until I see what is to be done. You had better have some things taken there, by the way; I forgot to mention that."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Ponsonby, who was overjoyed at Sir Edgar's prompt action in the matter, as well as at the decisiveness of the step he had taken; "you have done perfectly right I think. Of course," she continued, "you must be prepared for some comment being passed upon this; there would have been less publicity if she had remained here for a few days. However, I daresay we can contrive some explanation which will satisfy people. You will of course not mention to any one the orders you have given Alice; she, for her own sake, will keep quiet. Had we not better have up dinner? I

will tell the servants that she may probably not return this evening."

The meal passed almost in silence. Mrs. Ponsonby enjoyed herself not less than she was accustomed to do. Sir Edgar scarcely ate anything, but, contrary to his wont, drank a good deal; pouring himself out glass after glass of wine with evident excitement. Mrs. Ponsonby observed this, and again enquired if he were well.

"Yes, yes, quite well," answered Sir Edgar, even more roughly than before. "I wish you would eat your dinner and not mind me."

Then they both relapsed into silence again. The meal came to an end and dessert was handed.

"There is a man from the village waiting outside, Sir Edgar," said Norris, as he placed the decanters on the table; "he wished to see you at once, but I would not let him disturb you during dinner."

"What does he want?" asked Sir Edgar.

"Something about the flood, I believe," said the butler; "it has done a great deal of mischief, he says."

"The flood?" asked Mrs. Ponsonby, who had previously felt little interest in Norris's report, but now looked up at him with some agitation.

Sir Edgar remained silent, but perceptibly trembling. Trembling very much now: he knew now what that booming sound in the distance meant!

"Yes, ma'am," said the butler, replying to Mrs. Ponsonby's question, and somewhat surprised by the eagerness with which she had put it; "did you not hear the water come down? They say it was not so

much of a flood as they often have here; and that I can quite believe in such an outland . . . I mean," said the butler, correcting himself as he remembered whom he was addressing, "with such elevating scenery as there is about here; but they all heard it in the hall, and one or two of the servants went out to see. They wished me to come too, but I saw no necessity for that, and it was darksome like."

"Was anything seen?" again asked Mrs. Ponsonby.

"No, ma'am, nothing," said Norris; "it seemed to go by all in a minute, they said, but sounding terrible. I believe the man has come about a mill there is somewhere hereabouts, Sir Edgar," continued Norris, who addressed himself alternately to his master and Mrs. Ponsonby; "the wheel is broken, or some other damage done; and he said the bridge was carried away too; the one, ma'am, I mean, between this and the village. He meant to have come that way himself, but was stopped by the water, and had to go round by the road, which has made him so late."

"Very well," said Sir Edgar; "show the man into the library; I will speak to him presently."

Norris withdrew, and Mrs. Ponsonby turned to her brother-in-law with a countenance which had been increasing in pallor with every sentence of the late speaker.

"Of course, Edgar," she said in a tone which was intended to be calm, but showed all the more excitement from its effort to be so, "of course you do not think it possible at all?"

"Think what possible?" answered the baronet. "Do speak so that you can be understood." But he had understood her very entirely, for all that.

"Why," said Mrs. Ponsonby, "that . . . that is, that Alice may have gone that way; by . . . by the bridge, I mean?"

Sir Edgar made no reply, and Mrs. Ponsonby continued, still in the same forced undertone.

"You see," she said, "that was just about the time she went out; two or three hours ago, as Norris says."

"Well?"

"Well, she might have gone by the footpath, you know. It was unlikely, being so dark; but she might have done it."

"Yes, she might," said Sir Edgar. Already the evil leaven had begun to do its work; haughty as he was, the man stooped to an evasion. He would not confess to himself, probably he never might, that he had done a cowardly, cruel wrong; but somehow he did not care that any one else should know what he had done. Ah! but he had to stoop lower still!

"Edgar," said Mrs. Ponsonby, the falsity of her nature losing itself for a brief space in a sentiment of genuine terror, "do not answer me in that flip-pant way."

"Flippant!" ejaculated the baronet, in a tone which was so far removed from that offence that it made his companion start from her seat.

"No, of course I did not mean that," said Mrs. Ponsonby; "you know what I do mean; only just

tell me, Edgar, I am so wretched. If anything has happened in consequence at all of . . . of what I mentioned to you this afternoon, I should never forgive myself; I should feel as if I had murdered her," added the speaker, almost sobbing in the extremity of her apprehension. "You have no idea she went that way, have you: you did not see her go?"

Then came the final abasement. Sir Edgar hesitated for a few seconds before he actually uttered the negative. But he did utter it; merely smoothing it off as much as he could; bevelling the edges, as it were.

"See her go? No, how should I? I told her to take the road, and there was an end of it. Why should she not have done so?"

"No, no reason of course," answered Mrs. Ponsonby; "I daresay it is all right. I will send down some things for her at once, and then we shall hear."

Mrs. Ponsonby accordingly rose to leave the room for that purpose. But she came back a step or two from the door.

"Edgar," she said in a hoarse voice, hardly above a whisper, "you quite understand, do you not, that what I felt it my duty to name to you this afternoon,—about her and Percy Delacombe, I mean,—is an absolute secret between us; that my having done so must never be breathed to any living being? You promise me this, do you not?"

Sir Edgar motioned some assent, and Mrs. Ponsonby then left the room.

But her brother-in-law did not remain long there, either. He could not; the tumult of feeling in his own mind had become intolerable; he must be alone, must think it all over, if possible.

Quitting the apartment hastily, he returned to his library. Here he spoke a few words to the person who was waiting for him, desiring him to call again next day; then he despatched the latter, and locked the door, again giving orders that he should not be disturbed.

Sir Edgar's injunctions however did not admit of being carried out. Two interruptions to his privacy took place.

The first was of no serious importance. The solicitor who had been sent for from Swansea arrived, accompanied by his clerk, and Sir Edgar had no reasonable excuse for not seeing him. He had intended that the disposition of his property in Léonie's favour which was to be made by the present will should contain some elaborate provisions for her protection and for the general management of the estates. This however was out of the question in his present frame of mind. He dictated accordingly, almost mechanically, a short will, giving the bulk of his property to Léonie absolutely: anything which might be thought desirable beyond this could be made, he said, the subject of a more complete instrument hereafter. The will was accordingly drawn out, and was executed by Sir Edgar on the spot, the solicitor and his clerk attesting it.

Then he was once more left alone.

But the second interruption which Sir Edgar ex-

perienced was not so easily disposed of. It arose from himself.

He could not stop in the library!

Short as the will was, its preparation had occupied some little time; the servant whom Mrs. Ponsonby had in the interim despatched to the village with some necessaries for Alice's immediate use, and whose departure Sir Edgar had watched with feverish although suppressed anxiety, might be shortly expected back. And Sir Edgar must meet him; meet him instantly on his return: he could not restrain his intense longing to do so.

It was late in the evening, however, before the man came back.

On reaching the village, he had gone in the first instance, as directed, to the cottage occupied by Mrs. Reynolds; formerly Alice's nurse, and the person with whom Sir Edgar, although without the knowledge of any inmate of the house excepting Mrs. Ponsonby, and without her knowledge at the time, had desired her to remain until he should arrange for her future residence.

Mrs. Reynolds, the emissary found, had gone to bed. All lights were extinguished in the house; and when he at length succeeded in rousing her, she had nothing to communicate excepting the fact that Alice was not there, coupled with her fears that some accident might have occurred. The pretext for the intended visit of the latter which Mrs. Ponsonby had devised on the spur of the moment was probable enough in itself. Alice was always glad of an escape to the thatched cottage, myrtle-bowered

all the winter, and wreathed with rose and honeysuckle for the greater part of the year in addition, which her old nurse occupied; and she often passed a day or two with the latter, coming at short notice, and sometimes without any at all. Nothing in this therefore to cause uneasiness. What was ominous was that, notice or none, Alice herself had not appeared during the interval which had elapsed.

Failing information here, the man went round to two or three other houses which Mrs. Reynolds suggested that Alice might have entered by the way. But still no result. Not a vestige of her was to be traced anywhere. It was nine o'clock now, in fact; most of the inmates retiring to bed, or having already done so. Quite impossible she should be anywhere in the village portion of Trecoed!

At length the messenger returned to Ceniarth, seriously alarmed, and hesitating what course to adopt. His apprehensions began to take the same shape as Mrs. Ponsonby's. Was it possible that she could have attempted the path by the bridge, and been carried away in the fall of the latter? And, in any event, how was he to communicate the unsuccessful issue of his errand to her father?

He was saved any lengthened consideration on this latter score. As he approached the house, Sir Edgar met him on the carriage-drive outside. Quite by accident, as it seemed; the man had not a moment's suspicion to the contrary, either then or at any subsequent time.

But it was not accident.

For half-an-hour past Sir Edgar had been main-

taining a strict, stealthy watch for his return; had contrived their meeting exactly as they had done, arranged every detail so that there should be no chance of its miscarrying. He was feverish with excitement; dreading to hear the news which something told him was certain to come, and yet compelled by a stronger force within him to intercept the messenger; to hear it, not filtered through half-a-dozen channels, but from the fountain-head, at the very earliest moment!

Compelled to go through this. To listen to the man's faltering details. To simulate once more; personating the terror, the agony which would be natural on the receipt of such intelligence; compelled to do this, lest his own share in the matter might be suspected!

Yes: this was the real dread now, when he came to analyse it. Not the mere belief that some fatal discovery was at hand; the latter feeling had come first, but it had quickly merged in the more personal one, the coward's fear of detection for his crime! Truly Sir Edgar *was* changed!

No leisure however to analyse at present: instant search was imperative. It was ten o'clock by this time. But by eleven, in addition to the inmates of the house itself, numerous parties from the village and neighbourhood were on foot; torches improvised, and every effort made to discover some trace of the person of whom they were in quest.

The bridge was the first point made for. It was found, as the miller had stated, that this had been in great measure carried away by the flood; the

piers remaining, although much shattered, but the wooden planking which had formed the centre of the structure, entirely gone. Two or three of the underneath supports also remained, snapped off midway, and swaying helplessly over the water: nothing else was visible.

The search was then pursued down the stream, the parties who arrived on the spot from opposite directions exploring respectively their own bank; the stream, although still swollen, was not too high now to prevent their doing so.

For some time this too was without result. The torches were advanced to the edge of the water, and every bush and hollow carefully inspected, but nothing could be discovered to show that Alice had been there.

At length however the proof was supplied. More than one of the parties on the Ceniarth bank exclaimed simultaneously that on the opposite side there was some coloured object dangling from a low bush which dipped into the water there. This was secured with little difficulty, and at once recognised; a scarf which Alice frequently wore, and which the man who had last seen her crossing the hall believed her then to have had on.

The search was now renewed more actively than ever, with feelings of the most painful excitement. This however proved wholly unsuccessful. After a scrutiny which occupied more than half the night, and was carried, as far as the imperfect light would permit, nearly down to the point where the stream entered the sea, the task was abandoned for the

present as hopeless; those who had been engaged in it returning, baffled and wearied out, to their respective homes.

Nor was the renewal of the search on the following day, and on two or three which succeeded it, productive of any different result. The scarf was the solitary trace still; no other indication of any kind to show how and where Alice had met with her fate. That she had perished, no doubt was entertained; the only question was as to the recovery of the body.

It might have been carried out to sea by the flood of that evening. Might have been washed, much nearer to land, under some overhanging portion of the bank, where its discovery would be impossible. Difficult to say which.

Whatever shape these conjectures might assume, however, one fact was ere long universally admitted;—that any further quest was useless. One by one, the parties who had been employed in it, or had volunteered from sympathy with the family, desisted from a task which was so evidently hopeless. Even the catastrophe itself, deeply as it engaged local attention at the time, gradually assumed less prominence; and at length came to be remembered only as a melancholy incident in the past. Beyond the immediate neighbourhood, it should be added, the occurrence became little known. A long session was impending; and a paragraph in the Times and one or two other leading papers, unaccompanied by any comment, was all that appeared upon the subject.

CHAPTER V.

BETWEEN one and two years have elapsed since the events narrated in the last chapter.

It is summer again now. Past the early summer; London emptying, even before the August session has collapsed in helplessness; the continent and the sea-side, moor and mountain solitude, or what was once such, lake-gemmed Cumberland and heathery Dartmoor, receiving their contingent of pleasure-traffic. Scorn it not. If vulgarity, listlessness, ennui, are conspicuous enough, as in good sooth they are, there is another side to the picture. The specialities of English tourist-life,—outrages with which common-place revenges itself upon the objects which would refine or elevate it,—keep faithfully to the beaten tracks. Outside of these are leagues of beauty into which the cigar-reek never penetrates; redolent of life, restorative to the jaded eye and brain.

Amongst those whose holiday is needed on this latter score, and who is engaged in taking it accordingly, is Reginald Mansel.

Reginald's status has changed materially for the better during the interval; the improvement having arisen from a quarter in which, when we last parted with him, little of promise was discernible: his literary exertions.

Reginald has achieved authorship at last; and has "succeeded."

Not with verse, indeed. That earlier creation of his fancy, his first love, the poem in which he had embarked such eager aspirations, such wealth of hoarded thought and passionate imagery, lies still locked in his desk; whether it will ever see the light depends upon several weighty considerations.

What had helped him was a vigorous, although well-nigh despairing prose effort from his own pen. Prose; and fiction.

Why should he not try fiction? Novels got printed by the score; unspeakable trash, but there they were. Now and then, one of the most trashy, the most soulless, the most imbecile, would be suddenly discovered to be "charming," and run through its edition or two:—why should not he try? Write something he must; the craving was irrepressible, the fire scorched and the whirlpool seethed within him: why not write this?

Reginald wrote accordingly. Sheet after sheet fell from his pen. Night after night,—he would not subtract the time from the day's drudgery,—saw him still at his task, and still progressing: in six weeks, or thereabouts, there were tangible results, a complete volume.

Not a novel; not a full-grown one, that is, whether three volumes in orthodox fashion, or the three compressed, less pleasantly, into one: should any reader imagine, as some may, that six weeks will produce this, even in the least ambitious form, they had better try. Reginald's achievement was a

"novelette" only; and this had cost him pains enough.

Now that it was finished, too, there were still the Alps to cross; he must find a publisher. We must not follow him through the details of this. As before, he met with much good-nature, even kindness. But, as was to be expected, his object proved hard of attainment: with novels pouring from the press as they do, well might the capitalist hesitate in venturing with an untried name.

Nor was this his only difficulty. "A clever and well-written book," Reginald was candidly told in one instance, "if the morality were not so much against it."

"Morality!" Reginald exclaimed in some consternation,—for this was a personal interview; "I am really not aware of having written what could raise a blush on any cheek."

"That is the exact mischief," was the reply; "if you had, your book would have done exceedingly well. As to raising a blush, indeed, I won't say much; gentlemen don't blush, and most of the young ladies hereabouts have got beyond it; but you would have secured readers. As it is, and in this nineteenth century of the Christian era, I am afraid you have no chance."

Notwithstanding this adverse judgment, however, and after some further mishaps and heartburnings with which we need not trouble the reader, Reginald did find a haven. His book was read, accepted, and in due time went to the printer.

Reginald's delight when the first proof reached

him was unbounded. To see the dream-land of his fancy in actual type, was like coming out of the mist on a Westmoreland fell into the bath of sunshine on its lower slopes!

And how much more when the volume was worked off; bound; the copy which his publishers despatched to him on the day when it saw the light lying in bodily presence on his table! Page after page, as far as the uncut leaves would permit, he skimmed over the book. Quite different now to what it had looked in manuscript, or even when correcting for the press. Passages with which he had been familiar for weeks past, from their conception in the brain downwards, struck him with a new force. The sentences seemed illuminated; as if some invisible hand was tinting in among them the rainbow hues, the spangled gold and scroll tracery!

It must, must be read; must succeed!

Well; it did.

Something in it, impossible to say what; probably something which the writer would in his maturer judgment have struck out, caught the public fancy, and the book "went off."

Went off so well that when Reginald again took up the pen it was not without a cash equivalent. And by the time of which we now write the equivalent had become considerable.

It need not be added, that Reginald's mother shared to the fullest extent in the advantages consequent upon his rising authorship. The London lodging was long since exchanged for a small

house in the outskirts; in fact, Mrs. Mansel found herself established in all respects more to her satisfaction than had been the case since Reginald's birth.

The latter himself fared personally better at the same time. Fresh air and exercise came within his reach once more; night-work was abandoned; the bookseller's drudgery, although not wholly discarded, was reduced in quantity and greatly bettered in remuneration.

Meanwhile, with all ameliorations, Reginald's mental labour was still severe. By the August of which we write, his holiday had been thoroughly earned, and he is now engaged in taking it.

Not ambitiously, by any means. Mrs. Mansel's support, in the comparative comfort in which he had now placed her, drew largely upon Reginald's earnings. He had thought of Switzerland, but a fortnight was all the leave he could spare at present, and the cost of the journey was incommensurate with this. Somewhere pretty close at hand it must be. The sea-side would do; some watering-place, if such could be found, with no railway sufficiently near to launch its shoals of unappreciative visitors on down or beach.

Eventually, chance took the selection out of his hands.

"How is the name spelt, please?" asked the shopkeeper's wife at a minor post-office where Reginald was waiting, pending the issue of a money-order to another customer;—"wiche?"

"No," said the applicant; "a, g, e; Swan-age. It is in Dorsetshire, in the Isle of Purbeck."

"So it is," thought Reginald; "and I will go there."

Why the Isle of Purbeck is so called is perhaps locally known, or might be discovered by tracing some possibly confluent streams on a 22-inch ordnance map: in the general acceptation of the term, and on a superficial inspection, there seems nothing of an island about it.

Insulated however it is in one sense, by a half-moon of bold hill, which fences it on one side from the Poole basin, and on the other is itself projected in the cliffs of St. Alban's Head; the only inlet to the enclosed area being by Corfe Castle, the massive ruins of which, formerly of great strength and still imposing in their decay, overhang a break, or natural gorge, in the northern portion of the chain. Insulated too, for Reginald's present purpose, in another respect. Outside Corfe Castle, at Wareham, the railway makes its nearest approach to Swanage, which is on the sea-board of the so-termed Isle; the intervening seven or eight miles have to be walked or ridden.

So at Swanage Reginald found himself accordingly: alone, as far as purposed companionship went. Partly from poverty, and partly from the engrossing necessities of work, he had few associates; and like most hard workers, felt that, for extracting the pith and marrow of a holiday, the fewer the better. Cicero at Tusculum could not have competed with the indolence of a summer's

day on the beach, throwing shingle-stones into the water!

It was destined, however, that Reginald's stay at Swanage should not bear entirely the recluse character he had anticipated for it.

One acquaintance presented himself within two hours of his arrival there; a worthy fellow enough, Lankester by name; a former fellow-pupil with Reginald in Mr. Dayman's chambers. After some brief exploration of the Swanage lions, Reginald returned to the hotel for dinner, and found Lankester in the coffee-room there, waiting for an omnibus which ran to Wareham.

On a species of walking-tour, the latter explained; "Wilts, Somerset, and Dorset;" had galled his foot, and was compelled to ride that afternoon; going back to town for the rest of the Long Vacation, in the hopes of some chance conveyancing turning up.

"You are called then?" asked Reginald.

"Yes, more than a year now; have made just three guineas! Cheerful, isn't it? By the way, Mansel, what a lucky fellow you are."

"Indeed," said Reginald; "that is a somewhat new view of existence to me."

"It needn't be," said his companion. "Not that it's luck, either, of course, but brains; only then, as far as nous autres are concerned, that comes to the same thing. I read your new book the other day."

"You did it honour," said Reginald.

"Not a bit; I was delighted with it; couldn't put

it down, that was the truth. You don't give the public your name, though, Mansel. I should not have known who the author was but for Stopford; he had heard it somehow."

"Giving one's name is giving another hostage to criticism," said Reginald; "it is trying enough to have your book impaled in the reviews without one's family name,—I mean, without one's own name accompanying it."

"I am sure that you have not suffered much," said Lankester; "it was only last week . . . there, now, to think of that!" he added, interrupting himself with a sudden exclamation, as two ladies who had been walking on the esplanade in front passed the window of the coffee-room.

"Think of what?" asked Reginald.

"Why the chances that are going, if a fellow could only get in the way of them. If it wasn't for chambers, I should feel uncommonly inclined to stop here and have a try for this one myself."

"And what is the specific chance in question?" Reginald again asked.

"Why that girl who just passed; you didn't see her where you sat. Miss Brereton, a baronet's daughter in South Wales somewhere; loads of money, and the only child too."

"I never heard her name," said Reginald; "baronets' daughters are not much in my line, I am afraid."

"And I am sure they are not in mine," said Lankester. "But I met this one some months ago at a dance, and was introduced to her; a very nice

girl she is, too, and pretty into the bargain. One might have done something in an out-of-the-way place like this, perhaps; especially if she is romantic, goes in for scenery and that sort of thing. Well, it can't be helped; what was I talking about? Oh! your review. They really were most civil to you."

"Much more so than I deserved," said Reginald. "However, I will try and merit the kind word or two they eventually did say about me. But they laughed a great deal at the book first of all."

"Those reviews are awfully unfair," said Lankester. "I never wrote a book, and never shall, but it seems to me hard that one man should be able to sit down and crush you just from his own personal spleen; just because he has corns, or is bilious, or has been kept up in town, or something of the kind. Don't you think so, Mansel?"

"Well, really, no," said Reginald: "I mean, that the thing does not occur. With the third-rates—there is a sour weekly one which I could name if it were worth while—you may suffer; get passed on to some ruffian, as ignorant as he is brutal, who doesn't read the book he pretends to criticise, and could not appreciate it if he did. But with papers of any character you are quite safe; they are most fair, if anything, too indulgent. They may laugh at you, not very bad-temperedly after all, as the Saturday does. Or they may pick all the holes they can in you, as old Dayman used to do with the titles, and say that, subject as above, you are pretty tolerable. Or they may give you a thorough dissection secundum, artem, good points and bad alike. But,

whatever the form is, they do their work well, and really very leniently on the whole. If they are ever unbearably bitter, it is when you trade in some past success and get careless; but then of course that is one's own fault."

"But surely a committee of critics would be better," said Lankester.

"Heaven forbid," answered Reginald. "Just think; they couldn't all read all the books, to begin with; they must either have sub-committees, or a committee of selection, or something of the kind, ultimately and practically giving the single voice the power; not to mention the delegation of power to that worst phase of humanity, a body corporate. The fact is, you have a committee at present, as far as it is desirable. You are reviewed in half-a-dozen different quarters, and one review corrects the other; sometimes reverses it, as the Oriel fellowship at Oxford does the class-list. Do you know how many novels alone come out in a week, Lankester?"

"No; how many? Two?"

"Twenty sometimes," said Reginald: "so many, even in the least prolific weeks, that I feel very genuine shame at adding to the number. Think of that extenuating circumstance when the critic is morose or petulant."

"The 'bus, Sir, if you please," said a waiter, entering at this juncture, and addressing Lankester.

"All right," said the latter; "good-bye, Mansel; happy inspirations to you at Swanage. Is Miss Brereton staying here for any time, waiter?"

"Miss Brereton, Sir?" answered the man; "there is no one of that name in the house."

"In the house, no; I mean in the town; Sir Edgar Brereton's daughter; I saw her pass the window just now, with an elderly lady."

"I know who the gentleman means," said the Boots, who had just come in for some effects of Lankester's which had been forwarded from Weymouth; "them two ladies is at St. Clare House, at the fur end of the esplanade. They've been staying there nigh on a week, Sir; I took up their luggage from the office myself, and it's real ladies they is, and the sweetest face . . ."

The eulogy which Boots was about to pronounce, and which suggested that his *douceur* for the luggage in question had been a liberal one, was cut short by the driver outside, who was growing impatient.

"Don't keep the gen'l'man all day talking about sweet faces, you great fool," he growled; "your'n ain't none of 'em, anyhow. Now, Sir, if you please; we've the 8.40 up to catch, and she's sharp to a minute."

So Lankester shook hands with his friend once more, and entered the vehicle. While he is progressing to Wareham, and Reginald finishing his dinner at the hotel, we must shortly recapitulate how matters have gone with Léonie, and at Ceniarth generally, in the meanwhile. Let them stand for review in a new chapter.

CHAPTER VI.

It is with Léonie that we are most concerned during the period occupied by the brief summary of events which must now be given.

As between her and Percy Delacombe, the engagement has long since been terminated by mutual consent, or rather by the mutual confidence between them in which the catastrophe to Alice resulted.

Not immediately after its occurrence, indeed. For some days Percy remained wholly ignorant of what had happened. On his return to the vicarage after finally parting with Alice, Percy was seriously unwell, feverish with the grief and excitement he had gone through; and in the course of the evening this increased so much that medical assistance was sent for. Perhaps, indeed, this was fortunate, as it prevented him from accompanying his father in the distressing search for Alice the same night, or in its renewal on the following and subsequent days. The fever meanwhile ran high, and Percy, although not in actual danger, was delirious at times; much too ill to allow of the fate which in all probability had overtaken Alice being communicated to him.

Even when he was sufficiently recovered for this, it was with some precaution that Hatty told him what had happened. She knew nothing, of course, of his conversation with Alice on the day

of the catastrophe, but she had formed, since his return to Trecoed, a strong opinion as to the interest he still retained in the latter, and dreaded the effect which her narrative might have upon him.

Agitating and terrible indeed it was. Percy, who had been allowed to get up, but was lying on the sofa motionless, leapt from it on hearing the news, and had to be held back by main force from at once hastening to the scene of the accident.

Then, when Hatty's calmness and sense at length got the mastery of this, he wept, hour after hour of passionate grief; refusing food or speech; charging himself, in broken utterances, and to Hatty's extreme perplexity, with being the cause of the disaster. "It was all my violence, my selfishness," he exclaimed over and over again; "I can't see how, but I know they have led to it in some way."

Worn out at last, Percy slept, and sleep tranquillised him. The following morning he made Hatty leave him for some hours; then he sent for her to his room, and told her everything.

"I am absolved from my promise to Alice now," he said. "It was not a promise, in fact, only a confidence she imposed upon me, but it should have been as sacred to me as my plighted word. But that is all over now."

Hatty listened to the details with the deepest emotion. For one moment a terrible suspicion shot across her mind: what was Alice doing by the stream at that time of the evening? That she perished there, nobody could question; but, could it, could it have been by her own act; in the de-

spair which must have succeeded her last interview with Percy?

But the surmise was discarded as soon as entertained. Had Alice's mind been disturbed, such a result might have been possible, but certainly not in any other event: most alien would such cowardice have been to her whole character. And that there was no mental disturbance was palpable, even up to the moment when she and Percy finally parted.

No! No ground whatever for disbelieving the reason, a perfectly natural and plausible one, which Mrs. Ponsonby, on Alice's absence becoming known, had ascribed for her walking across to the village that afternoon. She had frequently done so at an hour quite as late, and no one had entertained a moment's question in regard to it: certainly Hatty would not. Had she only, only followed the road instead of the shorter path which proved so hazardous! But then, Alice of course had no suspicion of the hazard.

With these reflections, which, it need not be said, she did not communicate to her companion, Hatty dismissed all speculation on the point which had so painfully suggested itself.

Meanwhile, another task remained. It was mainly with reference to this, to discuss and advise on the best mode of effecting it, that Percy had sent for her. Léonie must be at once communicated with. She too must know everything; share with Percy the revelation, the terrible struggle of the past; decide absolutely upon his and her own

future. Should she wish the engagement to go on he, as a man of honour, would not shrink from it. But it would be lifelong agony.

Quite different now to the time when he had engaged himself. Then, downcast as he was at his disappointment, and with Alice still uppermost in his thoughts, he made no doubt that this would right itself. Her rejection of him had been final; he admired, liked, all but loved Léonie; even this, he believed would speedily follow; in plighting his word to her he felt no scruple whatever. But now, this marriage would have seemed almost a profanation! His nature had been stirred in its depths by the discovery of Alice's real feelings towards him, and, still more, by the fate, so dark, so mysterious, which she had since experienced; in the watery tomb which had closed over her his whole present and future lay engulfed. Still, should Léonie resent his breach of their engagement as a wrong, it must go on, broken-hearted work as it would be.

Hatty agreed with him on all points. The only question between them was as to the extent of the communication to be made to Léonie; how far was it honourable to Alice, even with the implied permission she had given, to disclose what Percy had overheard? Was it not too sacred even for Léonie's ear?

Hatty's strong sense however over-ruled the difficulty. "It is due to her," she said. "I could not bear that the engagement should go on; but if it is not to, she must be told everything; there is no middle course. And really it is almost better,

in one sense, that this last terrible grief has happened. But for that, you would have been bound by your promise to Alice; Léonie would have suspected nothing; you would have been married, and the ordeal to both of you would have been frightful! And now," said Hatty, rising, "I will go to her at once."

"You go?" exclaimed Percy, starting up from the sofa in his turn.

"Surely yes! You would not think of seeing her yourself?"

"It seems so cowardly to depute any one else," said Percy.

"Do not think of yourself, but of her," said Hatty; "put yourself in her place, and you will see at once how much unpleasantness this may save her. You are not strong enough, in any case," she continued, as Percy, wearied with the effort he had made, sank back upon the couch; "but I do not rest it upon that. It is for her own sake."

So Percy acquiesced, and Hatty started on her mission forthwith.

Léonie was at home, in a pleasant boudoir which Sir Edgar had assigned her, and which it had been Alice's pleasure to keep supplied with everything that could gladden the girl's heart. For winter, there were the soft, warm hangings, piled carpet, luxurious couch; for summer, the vases of flowers always renewed, fern-wreathed and moss-bedded; a parterre of beauty which Léonie might sit and gaze upon as if she were an Eastern princess.

But there were no flowers now. They might

have been had from the hothouses, winter as it was, but there was no Alice to fetch them; Léonie was too insouciant for her own pleasures to take much thought about them at any time, and far too miserable to do so now. So the room, notwithstanding all its appliances, looked desolate enough; a palpable void in every part of it.

But no void in the occupant's own heart. This was full of Alice; as full as if she had been still seated in the chair where Léonie always insisted on placing her, fronting the expanse of hill and woodland and distant sea; a fair scene, which from that point looked its fairest, and which, as Léonie knew, Alice's poet-eye loved to rove over.

The girl had been weeping bitterly; she had done little else since the fatal news was broken to her, three mornings before. And now, when Hatty entered, her tears broke forth again. For, was not Hatty a reproduction of Alice in some sort; her close friend; knowing her better, from the nearness of their ages, than even Léonie herself had done?

After a passionate burst of grief, Léonie sprang up and threw her arms round the visitor, kissing her eagerly on both cheeks. Hatty embraced and comforted her as she best might. Reseated her on the sofa; listened to the outpourings of the young heart, almost broken in its loneliness. And then Hatty despatched her task, repeating what she had just heard from Percy without omission of any kind.

Léonie listened throughout in silence. Then she came forward and, again kissing her visitor on

both cheeks, spoke simply and frankly. "Dearest Hatty," she said, "you have relieved me of something which, even with this grief, was beginning to trouble me on my own account. The truth is, dear Hatty, I have been a child, an utter child, up to a few days ago; up to that terrible news coming; but I feel, ever since that, as if my grief had made a woman of me. Sorrow does that sometimes, you know; and I am sure that this has been sorrow, such as I never dreamt of."

Again Léonie's tears flowed bitterly, but she checked them and resumed. "I did not mean to be so foolish; I meant to speak about myself and our dear Percy; I must always continue to call him so. Hatty, I never loved him; not as he deserves to be loved; as I hope he will be, even yet, some long time or another after all this. I thought I did; thought my liking was love; but I see now it was not. Love is such a deep thing; something that one can throw one's arms round and hold tight to all through life and after life, not the mere school-girl's play I was making of it! Tell dear Percy he is quite free; that we shall part, and I am sure meet, in all mutual kindness: how should we not, with this bond between us, this thought of *her*! Hatty, I am so wretched, so miserable; what you have just told me has made me ten times more so. To think that I have been the cause, although the most innocent one, of all that she has gone through; even, in some way, I cannot help fancying, of this dreadful end to it also."

"Not that, Léonie dear," said her visitor; "you

cannot for a moment suppose that . . . that whatever happened was Alice's own act."

Léonie thought for a moment, as Hatty had done, and then came to the same unhesitating conclusion. "It would be impious to do so," she said. "But still, I cannot shake off the feeling which crossed my mind just now, that what passed that terrible afternoon at the castle is connected with this last matter. I do not see how it can be, but I feel this all the same. Do you know, Hatty?"

"Know what, Léonie dear?"

"Why, that ever since that happened, there has been something very curious about Mrs. Ponsonby; such a scared sort of look about her. I wonder if she could have had anything to do with it!"

"Impossible," said Hatty; "how should she?"

"Well, so I say to myself," answered Léonie; "but still I do notice it for all that. And she is so odd, too, in another way, quite different from what she used to be; I mean, about religion. She has begun having family prayers, which she always used to sneer at; began it quite of her own accord. And then, in church, last Sunday, she was so different, keeping her finger on the place in the book all the time, with such . . . such a guilty sort of look; that is the only word for it. It is horrid observing such things in other people, but I cannot help it with her. What strikes me so much is, that I do not think she cares at all more in reality about the service, or prayers, or anything of that kind, than she ever did. She seems to cling to them in a sort of desperate way, just as a poor man who was going

to be executed might; as if there was some charm in them."

"I daresay she was greatly shocked and grieved at what happened," said Hatty.

"I don't know about shocked," said Léonie. "Grieved she could not possibly have been, for she hated Alice: I saw it years ago, even with my girlish eyes. And do you know," continued Léonie, to whom this vent of her pent-up emotion was an inexpressible relief, "I fancy that, unobservant as I am, I have once or twice lately had some idea about Alice herself."

"How do you mean?" asked Hatty.

"Why, about her caring for Percy. I suppose if I had really loved I could not have failed to see this; but I did begin to guess something of it, although not the hundredth, hundredth part of the truth; of the sacrifice she was making for me, frivolous, heartless girl that I have been! You understand though, Hatty, don't you?" added the speaker, as a new thought occurred to her.

"Understand what, dear?"

"Why," said Léonie, "that it isn't that I do not appreciate dear Percy. It seems such a bad compliment to speak as I have just done! But it isn't that really, it is myself I was thinking of; my own miserable trifling, which has led to all this. And now, you had better go and comfort him, poor fellow; it must be awful for him to bear; I wonder he does not hate me for being the cause of it all. Poor Percy!"

"I should mention, Léonie dear," Hatty said, as

she prepared to take her leave, "that there is one thing Percy is anxious about. We both thought that you ought to know what passed between him and Alice that day; but no human being besides yourself must ever do so. You will promise me this, will you not?"

Léonie considered for a moment. "Do not bind me," she then said; "leave me free, please. I am sure Percy will trust my being as jealous for Alice's memory as he could be himself. But there is something mysterious, something which I do not quite understand about all this. I am not sure that a time may not come when you would both of you wish that it should be known what really happened. Leave me free, Hatty dear; free to act as Percy himself would do, should anything of the kind arise."

Hatty looked up with some surprise at the speaker. A different voice from that of Léonie seemed already audible; one which sounded, not with a truer note than heretofore, but with the woman's purpose in it, supervening upon, without altering, the naïve freshness of the original. She made no comment, however, but assured Léonie that her wish should be assented to, as far as she was herself concerned. And when the matter was afterwards referred to Percy, he did the same.

So the engagement between the two terminated. As regarded Sir Edgar Brereton, no difficulty arose. At Léonie's request, Percy left it to herself to apprise him that the marriage would not now take place, which she accordingly did shortly afterwards.

For the fact as such Sir Edgar was of course prepared by Mrs. Ponsonby's communication; while as regarded Percy, Sir Edgar's resentment at the conduct of which he supposed him to have been guilty was precluded from expression by the promise he had given Mrs. Ponsonby, as well as by the effect which the recent occurrence had produced upon himself. Sir Edgar was, in fact, rapidly altering in more ways than one.

A month or two later, Mr. Delacombe's interest obtained for Percy an appointment to a ship. Not one of the turret-ships, as he had wished; some delay had occurred in the construction of these, and the earliest would not be ready for two or three years: an ordinary iron-clad, bound for China, for which he accordingly sailed shortly afterwards.

Still later, Léonie paid a visit to her aunt, Miss Lester, at Bayswater. A visit of a few weeks only, was the first intention. But the weeks grew into months, and Léonie still remained there; Miss Lester's house practically became her home. Sir Edgar not only made no attempt to enforce her return to Ceniarth, but seemed relieved by her absence.

In all substantial matters, indeed, his interest in her remained unchanged. Léonie was now formally recognized as his heiress, and every arrangement made for her eventually succeeding to the estates. Her allowance was on the most liberal scale; and in London, Sir Edgar Brereton's only daughter, as she was usually supposed to be by those who were not conversant with the facts, had as many intro-

ductions at her command as she thought fit to avail herself of. But to Ceniarth itself, although still nominally resident there, Léonie was now practically almost a stranger. A heavy gloom had settled down upon its remaining occupants; and, whether from the feeling that this was uncongenial to a character like Léonie's, or from the contrast which her own brightness offered to it and which perhaps added to its oppressiveness in the minds of those to whom it was habitual, she was allowed, and tacitly almost encouraged to seek her home elsewhere.

And now this had gone on for upwards of a year and a half; bringing the date, as well as the portion of our story comprised in this necessary, and, it is hoped, not wholly tedious recapitulation, down to that of the preceding chapter.

As regards Léonie's self,—the inner self, that is, as distinguished from the external relations of which we have been speaking,—some change has also taken place during this interval.

Time has healed her first passionate grief for Alice. It could not fail to do this. We were not intended to live in any past; emotions are not durable like facts. The feeling is either exhausted and disappears without trace; or it passes, as with the truest natures it ever does pass, into the memory, deepened by use into a part of our own being, of that which is gone from us.

Léonie has not forgotten Alice; she never will; but she is herself once more, only with this added recollection. Quite as outspoken as ever; quite as little of the conventional young lady, whether of

romance or of educational theory. But still with some difference about her, something softened.

Perhaps it is due to her more advanced years. Perhaps to the recollection of that period of sorrow; to the fact that she has now felt sorrow. In the gloom and drenching rain of winter is nursed the tender growth of the spring-flower. In sadness and suffering woman learns her deep heart of love; the germs are in the soil, but these fostering influences are required to develop them in the bud!

To some extent too Léonie's Bayswater life has added to this. Miss Lester is much less of the invalid now, requiring little beyond companionship; and Léonie, with the sanction of the latter, has put herself and her Trecoed experiences under clerical rule in the parish, and works sedulously in furtherance of a "mission" which has been started there. Léonie has no purpose of becoming a nun, or even a deaconess; it is not her vocation. But in this matter, which has come in her way for the time being, she stints neither purse nor personal labour; labour with the hands at all times, and as much school-teaching and sick-visiting besides as discretion permits in her case. And as a London "mission," whatever may be thought of the name, represents at any rate a great deal of real help to a great many helpless people, it is probable that Léonie, in her intercourse with pain and privation, is moulding the avenir of her woman's life not unprofitably.

Now and then Miss Lester drives her to one of the parties for which invitations and chaperones are

always offering themselves. And when once there, Léonie enjoys herself as much as if she were not an heiress; dances all the evening; and passes the next day in bed with a racking headache!

At the present time Léonie has been similarly "driven" to Swanage. Miss Lester was the first adversary. Léonie was working too hard; the headaches making their appearance when there had been no party; change required: so the aunt insisted. And when Léonie, who really was getting ill, consented at last to see a doctor, he supported the attack. Change unquestionably; the sea-side; some quiet place best.

So Léonie found herself established with Miss Lester at the Dorsetshire watering-place. The latter her aunt's choice, who had resided near the spot in early life and retained an attachment to it.

CHAPTER VII.

THE sea-beach again.

Not that of our opening chapter, however; not Gower, but Swanage.

It is the morning after Reginald's arrival at the latter place. He is enjoying his brain-holiday to the full. Has sauntered down to the water's edge. Sauntered along there, watching the waves come in. Sauntered up to the coast-guard station on the hill, which, with the spy-glasses of its occupants, forms such a desirable reprieve from the non-occupation of a small watering-place. Finally, returned to the shore, and deposited himself, book in hand, on the shady side of a boat there.

Not reading, however; not even pretending to do so. Book-makers, if at all effective in their craft, are often bad readers, at least for amusement's sake. If the volume is un-ideal, it does not amuse. If it does contain matter for thought, it runs the risk of becoming too suggestive, setting the mental alchemy at work again; and that is no recreation either. On the whole, if Reginald's poet-soul was doing anything at all at this period, it was probably speculating on its chances of a tranquil doze.

But the expectation, if such it were, was not to be gratified.

Just on the confines of sleeping and waking, Reginald became conscious of a light step approach-

ing from the side of the esplanade. There were several light feet in motion on the beach, and Reginald did not trouble himself to ascertain who was the proprietor of those which had invaded his solitude; unintentionally, of course, as in his position he was out of sight, unless indeed the intruder had walked round the boat or inquisitively peered over it. He lay on, relapsing after a few moments into the semi-forgetfulness from which he had been roused.

Presently, however, a heavier tread became audible. Traversing the beach, in this case, in a direction parallel with the water; crunching the shingle under it, yard by yard, in its tardy progress, as if the walker were carrying some weight.

Nothing in this either to attract the attention of a drowsy man. Reginald just took note that these facts were in evidence, so to speak, and that the person who now approached was also on the side of the boat opposite to him; nothing more. Even these details became complicated with the appearance of a large cod-fish on the beach, which presently turned into his friend Lankester and requested the loan of a watch-key; and, as this transaction clearly belonged to dream-land, the realities of which he was conscious were contentedly allowed to repose side by side with them.

The light feet, however, were more interested in the matter. What they had been doing with themselves meanwhile did not appear; but as the crunch, crunch of the shingle sounded in closer proximity to the boat, they moved hastily forward to meet the new comer.

"Oh! what beauties!" exclaimed a voice which clearly did not belong to the latter; at least, if it did, Nature had paired her endowments on some wholly unexplained principle. A voice which, as Reginald again passed from sleep to wakefulness, interested him on its own account. Not as a sweet, young voice merely, although it was both these. Not, again, from a certain persistence in it, which was also noticeable, and, having regard to its being sweet and young, by no means objectionable. No; what struck him was that it was a voice he had heard before.

When? where?

Ah! that he could not tell; something had fixed it in his memory, but he could not recall what. The colloquy meanwhile proceeded.

"Yes, Miss, them is, and that be'ant no story nayther," said the person who had been addressed; a feminine voice also, although pitched in a very different key.

"Aunt is so fond of prawns," said the first speaker, "I'm sure she will like some for her tea. How much are they?"

"Only a half-crown a hundred, Miss; and that's giving on 'em away, so fresh out of the water as they is. I'd minded to have took them Weymouth way, but I thought on trying in here first; my husband said as there was so many families of quality here now."

"Very well," said the customer; "if you will take some up to the house, please, the people there will pay for them."

"That will I, Miss, and pleased to serve ye," answered the other voice: "but 'deed now, I forget just this minute which the house be."

"You must be very clever to forget," said the first speaker, "for you never knew. St. Clare House; just above here; that one where the green blinds are."

St. Clare!

That was where Miss Brereton lodged, Reginald recollected; the Boots had told Lankester so overnight.

In spite of himself, his interest was roused. "Baronets' daughters were not much in his line." No; of course they were not. Still, he did feel some curiosity to see Sir Edgar Brereton's heiress; the "only child" so favoured by fortune in all respects. "A very nice girl too and a pretty one," Lankester had said in speaking of her, in addition to "the loads of money." Let him have a peep.

So Reginald rose and looked about him; counterfeiting a yawn at the same time that he might not seem to be looking with any object.

There was no risk of detection however; the speakers stood at some little distance from him and the backs of both were towards him:—quite presumable that he had strolled down to the beach during their dialogue.

Seeing this, Reginald advanced still nearer. The final instructions were given by this time, and the younger speaker turned round; exhibiting to his view as she did so a face which he instantly recognised.

Recognised; yes, and how much more!

Ever since he had first seen it in Kensington Gardens this was the one face which had haunted him, night and day. It had been the soul of his soul, the image which he had woven into prose and verse; an unforgotten presence, throbbing in every vein, twining itself into every fibre of his being, pouring into the commonest sights and sounds around him the fever-draught of love!

Hopeless love, enough; he knew that. What likelihood was there that he should ever again meet her, the fair girl who had glanced before him in his deepest depression like the grottoed vision of the nympholept? And, even if he did, what chance would there be for him;—a penniless adventurer, winning by the indulgence of the public, by his brow-sweat and brain-servitude, a precarious subsistence?

Hopeless, indeed. And yet the meeting, now that it had taken place, sent the blood for one moment dancing through his veins like quicksilver.

Alas! for a moment only. Then the despair which settled down upon him was darker than ever.

He knew now the quarter in which his attachment had fixed itself! Sir Edgar Brereton's daughter; wealthily dowered; a lovely girl, ten times more so than he had thought her on their first meeting, worthy to occupy and adorn any station; that was the person he had presumed to love! Madman!

Concurrently with these reflections meanwhile, and in spite of them, there was one external fact which forced itself upon his notice. Miss Brereton had palpably recognised himself!

Although probably no human countenance ever underwent, in the act of doing so, a more marked change than did Léonie's.

Surprise; the extremity of surprise; that was its first expression. Followed, the very second afterwards, inseparably, in fact, in time and character from it, by a look of unmistakable pleasure. Then, almost before Reginald had any leisure to observe this, the expression again altered. A look of grief, anguish, almost terror this time; something under the influence of which the beholder shrunk from him; not apparently with a personal feeling, but as if an apparition had crossed her path!

Léonie however quickly recovered herself. She came forward and offered Reginald her hand; tendering him renewed thanks for the opportune assistance which he had afforded on their last rencontre, and for which, she added, her aunt and herself were both sensible they had not expressed themselves warmly enough. And then she did more. While Reginald was stammering forth, author as he was, some very incoherent deprecation of her gratitude, Léonie explained to him the cause of the singular emotion she had just shown.

"I hardly know how to apologise for my rudeness," she said; "I mean, in meeting you as I did just this minute. I only trust you will forgive me when I mention that I was really startled for the moment; startled by your resemblance to a very, very dear friend whom I lost a short time since, under the most painful circumstances. I noticed the likeness," Léonie added with something of a blush, "that day in

Kensington Gardens, when you were so chivalrous; but just now it struck me so much more forcibly; I am afraid I thought all kinds of foolish things for the moment. Will you forgive me?"

Again Reginald made some stammering reply, and Léonie continued. "I hope you will," she said, "for I am sure that my Aunt, Miss Lester, the lady who was with me that day, will be most anxious to see you; we are lodging at St. Clare House here. You know," Léonie added, "we do not at present even know your name; my aunt has so often regretted that she did not ask it that day."

Reginald contrived to produce his name without serious embarrassment, and to add that he should hope to do himself the pleasure of waiting upon Miss Lester. Some trivial conversation followed; and then they again shook hands and parted.

With Léonie's reflections during the evening we are not at present concerned. Reginald Mansel's must be given in such shape as the close of the present chapter will permit.

"*I must* love her," such formed their culminating point: "foolish, even wicked as it is with that dark past hanging over me; and yet I must do it. She is my life, my reason, my whole self! Of course I shall not remain here, not, at any rate, until I have solved this mystery. I will call to-morrow; it would be ungentlemanly not to. But then I will at once return to town, return home; see my mother; demand from her the knowledge of . . . of my father, of who and what I am. Better to know the worst at once. Were it anything even tolerable, I might . . .

might perhaps be insane enough still to hope. She is so gentle, so frankly and simply kind, with all her wealth and beauty! But no, it is not tolerable; I know it is not, cannot be; and yet I must, I will learn it. It would be an outrage to her, to my own sense, to stop on here, plunging deeper and deeper into the abyss every day, without doing so!"

Little did Reginald anticipate that, in spite of his resolutions, day after day would find him still lingering in a neighbourhood fraught with so much danger. Becoming every day more helplessly the slave of an overmastering passion; wholly unable to tear himself away, even for the purpose of obtaining that knowledge in regard to his family circumstances which, he rightly argued, it was so indispensable on all accounts he should possess!

Still less did he guess the insupportable misery of the hour when he eventually should come to know these; the riving asunder, as of heart and limb, in which it would result!

Patent enough, probably, to the reader, this result; to those who have at all followed the course of our story it can hardly be otherwise. Nor was it designed to be so. The adventitious interest which depends upon mystery, even in the best authenticated, the most real narrative of human grief and suffering, is of small value.

But to the actors, the main actors in what was to ensue, how shrouded from sight were the easy facts which would have explained everything; how impossible, in their very ease and simplicity, to unravel!

From the most simple elements the most fatal of tragedies—and that of which we write is not wholly fatal—may be evolved. Let those who doubt it read in the poet-lore of elder days the doom of Œdipus, son of Læius!

CHAPTER VIII.

REGINALD paid his visit of ceremony at St. Clare, the visit which it would have been such a breach of good manners to omit, on the day following that of his rencontre with Léonie.

The house was small, but detached; a pleasant garden surrounding it, and forming a relief to the sea-view which in most watering-places is in redundancy, especially when the month is August. The room into which Reginald was shown, and in which he was for some time left alone, opened on the lawn: the interior was scantily furnished, as far as its own resources went, but bore numerous traces of its present occupants; flowers, painting, music, work; books above all, for Léonie was an indefatigable reader.

Library books, for the most part. Some brought from town; others evidently forming part of the local circulation.

Reginald's eye, however, was caught by one exception. A crown octavo volume; the outside of which, tastefully devised in shape and hue, he certainly knew well by sight, although he did not often see it:—his own most recent essay in print!

Not a library book this, as we have said; neither Mudie nor Smith asserted any claim to it, still less the Swanage establishment. No indications of loan-ship of any kind. Was it private property?

Reginald could not resist the inclination to look. He took up the volume, and turned to the fly-leaf, which at once solved the question. Private property; and the owner's name, "Léonie Brereton," written in a neat but rapid hand.

So that was the name was it? "Léonie!"

Small use his knowing it, of course; serving only to fan a hopeless, objectless passion: still, he was glad he had seen it. And what a beautiful name; how much softness in it; how much character at the same time: how like herself!

Had she read the book, Reginald wondered?

Yes, unquestionably; the leaves cut throughout. Read it pretty diligently too; with attention at any rate. Young ladies do not thumb books, but one or two of the pages were . . . well, rather worn by use: besides, there were passages marked here and there, long pencil lines down the margin; in one place, three of these lines side by side; triplicate approval.

A most reprehensible practice; nothing which Reginald disliked more. Still, in this case, the lines were very neatly drawn, he was bound to admit; besides; besides!

Well; no use going into that. If love, even mere admiration, cannot discover twenty apologies for a pretty culprit, let the female homicides of the future look to it. Having condoned thus much, however, Reginald must perforce go further; he must see what the marked passages were; some further element of extenuation to be found in them, no doubt.

Since the last proof was corrected, Reginald had not read one syllable of the work in question. Speaking in round terms, from the date of publication onwards he loathed his own books, and the last generally the worst. But now, on glancing at the passages to which his attention had been thus called, he was astonished. What beauties of imagery; what wealth of thought; what hitherto unseen and unsuspected grace of diction! He had seldom read anything much better! And was this really his own handiwork?

In the interest of Reginald's occupation he was not aware that some one had entered the room meanwhile;—the step which had fallen so lightly on the shingle beach the day before, was still more noiseless on the carpeted floor at St. Clare. The newcomer spoke, however; and then Reginald at once dropped his book on the table in some confusion, blushing crimson as he did so.

"I fear that we have kept you waiting," said Léonie; "my aunt will be here almost immediately. Do sit down, please."

Reginald did as he was ordered, and made some attempts at conversation.

Very ineffectually; every topic seemed to fly from him like the water from the lips of Tantalus. Here was the opportunity which he would have given worlds for; not of indulging his absurd passion, but of seeing, conversing with its object, spending priceless moments in the sunshine of that society; and yet, now he had the chance, he could make no more use of it than a baby!

The present hot weather; he got as far as that, after a good deal of stumbling and hesitation. But that was ridiculous; what could she know or care, with her girl-heart, about the thermometer being 78° in the shade? And yet, what else was there?

Nothing: a hideous blank!

He must speak however; he did so; the weather once again. "Probably it was a great deal higher out in the sun."

Léonie had nothing to say against this conjecture; but as it had no tendency to open up any of the deeper sources of human interest, her assent went little beyond assent, and Reginald was again at sea;—drifting without oar or compass.

Seeing this, Léonie good-naturedly came to the rescue.

It seemed strange, no doubt; with a face, a brow, so full of intellect, so like Alice—Léonie could not forbear a furtive glance at their visitor as she thought thus—it seemed strange that he should be sitting in that incapable way. But perhaps she was mistaken; in spite of looks he might be something wholly common-place after all. However, here he was. And unless they were to sit like two figures of patience on two monuments, she, Léonie, must take the initiative; start some subject of conversation which might develop the latent powers of her vis-à-vis, if there were any such, or enable her to uphold some atmosphere of social intercourse, if there were none. So Léonie began.

"I saw you were looking at that book on the table when I came in."

"That book?" asked Reginald, although perfectly knowing which book was meant.

"Yes," said Léonie, "that one in green binding and gold letters, with some things like Jews' harps round it."

"I . . . I just took it in my hand for a minute," said Reginald, colouring more violently than ever at finding that his detection was a fait accompli.

"Have you seen it before? It has not been out very long, I believe?"

"No," said Reginald; "that is, I mean, yes. I saw it a month or two ago."

"I think it is charming," said Léonie with enthusiasm. "It is exactly the book which I have been fancying all my life somebody ought to write, but which nobody has written yet: something so delightfully unconventional. One has quite enough of girls of the period, without their going on through a volume or two hunting down men who never belonged to any period at all. Do you know who it is by?"

Here was a climax of all things!

A writer discovered in the act of turning over the pages of his own book, and then compelled to confess that it was his own! Cheerful, certainly! Was there no escape?

Reginald cast about for any conceivable form of evasion, but none offered. Nothing; short, that is, of the express and particular disclaimer of authorship which the "Magician of the North" is said to have perpetrated under pressure, on a certain memorable occasion. And we are bound to confess that even this alternative did occur to Reginald; that the easy

negative did make some progress towards the outer sanctuary of the lips. But it proved hard of utterance. Reversing the evil fate of Hippolytus, the mind consented, in some sort, to the fraud, but the tongue refused to perpetrate it!

So Reginald stammered out his admission, sheepishly enough. Think not scornfully of him, gentle reader; or, if you do, put yourself, whichever sex you may belong to, into the circumstances of a youthful lover confronting an exceedingly pretty girl, and learn for the future to be less censorious. Reginald stammered out, sheepishly enough, "I believe . . . I mean, I think; that is, yes, I do."

"Oh! do tell me," said Léonie, almost clapping her hands with delight; "I have so longed to know; do tell me; what is his name?"

"Mansel," said Reginald, escaping, as far as circumstances would admit, from the gaze which Léonie had fixed upon him in her eager enquiry, and apparently studying the movements of a fishing-smack in the offing.

"Mansel!" echoed his companion; "why, that is your own name; although I did not know it until you told me yesterday. Do you mean . . ."

Léonie stopped abruptly, still looking at their visitor, although the naïve utterance of the face now expressed a conflict of feelings; surprise, interest, and shall we add, delight? in lieu of the simple curiosity which had before characterised it.

Surprise, indeed. Was this hesitating, un-ideal stranger, as she had been disposed to consider him only the minute before,—serviceable enough where

a London rough was in question, but wholly unfit for any other relation of civilised life,—was he really an author; more than an author, the man whose published work had touched her soul in its very depths?

Meanwhile, Léonie's implied question had been asked, and must be answered. Nothing for it either now, but to make a clean breast of it.

"I believe, Miss Brereton," he said, "that I must admit the identity of the person as well as the name; rather a difficult admission, considering how you found me occupied just now. But I daresay you will believe me if I tell you the truth about that also. I was not re-perusing my own composition; some writers may be self-satisfied enough to do so, but I am entirely exempt from any such temptation myself. The handiwork I was studying was not mine, but that of an over-indulgent reader: I took up the volume to see who owned it, and, observing some pencillings in the margin, turned it over to see what passages had been fortunate enough to attract them."

It was now Léonie's turn to blush. "Pray forgive my being so foolish," she said, "if it was foolish; I have not at all made up my mind that it was. I could not help marking bits here and there; they are so beautiful, so exactly what one would wish to write oneself, if one could only do it."

Reginald struggled to say something, but his utterance was choked. He had tasted, together with the hardships of authorship, some of its satisfactions; but he had never enjoyed, never dreamt of, anything like this. To have the cup raised to his lips by those hands! to feel that the soul which was enshrined in

that fair form had been touched by his words; beat in unison with his own!

A joy-draught, rarely quaffed indeed. Let him drain it, while he may!

"I am so glad you like it," he said timidly; "I wish all readers did the same."

"But they do," said Léonie; "it is spoken of everywhere. Even the reviews admit that it is a book of real genius."

"Do not say that, please, Miss Brereton," Reginald answered. "I do not know that I have special need to be on my guard against any presumption of that kind, but I do know that in my case it would be a great presumption. I am not quite sure," he added, "that I believe even in the existence of the quality you have just named."

"Do you not?" asked Léonie, wonderingly.

"Well, no," answered Reginald; "not in its existence as a specific force, irrespective of others. I am rather disposed to think that it is a compound of several. As our Oxford professor, Max Müller, has nobly said, 'Genius is only long patience.'"

"But," said Léonie, "whatever it really is, some people have it, and some have not. It always seems to me such a great thing for a man to lead the minds of others; to speak or write so that they must sound the particular note he strikes; laugh or cry, or get frightened just as he plays upon them. That is genius, and it is a grand thing; I have so wished that I had it."

"It is a very responsible thing," said Reginald sadly. "It is responsible enough to feel that every-

thing we say and do from morning to night influences somebody in some way; but it is much worse when you take the direction by your own choice. I often think how much happier a position than that of any writer, however powerful or brilliant, is that of the mere witness, be he the very humblest, to some truth external to him."

"How do you mean?" asked Léonie earnestly. Something in the speaker almost riveted her. Not the mere resemblance in feature to Alice now, but the identity of expression and manner; the same tones of the voice; the same undercurrent of deep thought. An acquaintance of twenty-four hours, or less, barring their first brief meeting; a stranger of whom, himself, his antecedents, Léonie knew absolutely nothing; and yet she felt more at home with him than she had ever yet done with any human being!

For Alice's sake?

Not so entirely now, even this. Léonie had neither time nor desire to analyse at present what she did feel; but she was conscious, in some vague way, that she did feel this. Here, somehow, was the point to which, all her life long, her currents of thought and feeling had been instinctively tending; the mind that might be dominant over her own; the master-key to the treasures of discovery which lay between the child-life of the past and the future of yearning womanhood!

Meanwhile Reginald had answered her question. "I hardly like to speak of such things," he said. "But what I meant was that the simplest truth, as

such is so far above any theory, any other teaching; that the persons who are entrusted with it have a privilege beyond that of all human beings. Of course," he added, "I was thinking when I spoke of the highest truths of all; of those which alone are such; moral truths, Christian truths. The humblest country clergyman, as a mere teacher and even irrespective of the supernatural gift which attaches to his office, is wielding powers beyond those of all the politicians, and poets, and philosophers put together. And yet, instead of feeling overwhelmed with this, it is just the thing, if he does, or tries to do his work properly, which makes his life a happy one; there is no responsibility for the results of what he does, only for the way in which he does it."

"Have you always felt like this?" asked Léonie.

"I am ashamed to say not," answered her visitor; "I do not feel it now, to any practical purpose. I was intended to take orders; I had an uncle who greatly wished it, and so did my own mother, although perhaps for a different reason, but some other feeling has always interfered. I feel thoroughly that is the noblest use to which one can put any abilities one possesses; but the channels they in fact run in are different. Hard work and poor pay as literature is, I have not been able to tear myself from it."

"It must be very hard work writing novels," said Léonie.

"Pretty hard in itself; fortunately, it does not require many accessories. Eyes and ears come by nature; pen, ink, and paper are cheap enough; as to one's library, a volume of Shakespeare and another

of Bishop Butler are abundance. Many a Lancashire cotton-spinner would be overjoyed if he could start with such a costless stock-in-trade."

"But it takes long," said Léonie; "you must have been months over this book."

"I am afraid not," said Reginald; "I was too poor to afford it so much time."

"Poor!" Léonie said to herself; "yes, indeed, I shall not easily forget how starved and threadbare he looked that day in the park. He seems more comfortably off now, but I daresay he is often in difficulties, even so; authors generally are. I wish I might help him out of my own money; he should have such oceans of it!"

Reginald seemed to divine the course her reflections had taken, so he went on.

"I was very badly off at one time," he said, "and now I have only my literary earnings; but they are as much as I need. Do you make any stay here?" he added, escaping from the subject, which however had enabled him to find his tongue during the interval.

"Some weeks, I hope," said Léonie; "it is a charming place; and this house is very nice, although we were sadly disobedient about it;—entirely my obstinacy. Papa wrote to my aunt to take the best house that was vacant, so we felt bound to inspect the mansions in the first instance. We went over some on the Esplanade; those conceited-looking houses which stand in pairs, with the vases and the brown-and-white dogs in front of them."

"And they did not meet with your approval?" asked Reginald.

"I thought them detestable," said Léonie, whose sentiments on most subjects were as energetic as ever. "I don't know why, but they reminded me of Pomford Price and his wife."

"Who are they?" Reginald asked again.

"He is a very low-church clergyman near us, with a very red face," said Léonie; "and she is his first cousin, just the same height, and generally ditto ditto in all respects; so that they look as if they might change clothes without being found out. A new footman Papa had some years ago, announced them at a dinner-party as 'the Reverend and Mrs. Pomp and Pride;' and that is exactly what they are. I know," added Léonie, colouring, "that Aunt would tell me I am very uncharitable."

"Meanwhile," said Reginald, "Mr. Price saved you from the Esplanade?"

"Yes. I got Aunt back to the hotel under pretence of lunching her, and then expeditionised on my own resources. So of course I found this house directly, which is smaller, but ten times as pleasant; the bit of garden is nice, and it stands by itself, which is another comfort."

"I certainly don't like houses in pairs," said Reginald; "apart from the community of pianofortes, there is a feeling that you are being reproduced all day long next door in everything you do. It is like having a wraith; a double of oneself, I mean."

"Oh! we know all about wraiths in Gower," said

Léonie; "our people there believe in them unspeakably."

"It is delightful to hear of such a place," said Reginald. "Do they believe in anything else?"

"Spectres, apparitions, charms, spells, witches, dancing fairies, and all kinds of hobgoblins," said Léonie. "By the way, you have no connections in Gower, have you?"

"I regret to say none," answered Reginald; "I heartily wish I had after such a description. Why do you ask?"

"Because there is an old gentleman of your name who rides up and down the sands in Rhosilly bay every night at low water, in a coach and six horses."

"That is more than I shall ever be able to do," said Reginald: "what is the inducement in his case?"

"He can't help himself," said Léonie. "A quantity of years ago, somewhere about Queen Anne's time, there was a Spanish galleon which came ashore there, and this old gentleman pillaged her and ran away to the Continent, where he came to a bad end: and ever since that he has 'walked,' or ridden rather. Papa told us of a man who was nearly frightened to death by him some years since; he met him coming back from his drive; nobody would venture near the sands at that hour on any account, but this was in a lane some way off, which was unfair of your namesake."

"I know nothing of Gower," said Reginald. "Is it like the rest of Wales?"

"Not mountainous," answered Léonie, "but such

a picturesque coast; such beautiful cliffs and bays. There is a bay near here which they say is like one of ours; Lulworth cove; I should so much like to see it, but I hardly know how. Perhaps Aunt may be able to manage the distance."

Reginald's heart leapt to his mouth in the desire of proffering his services in the event of Miss Lester being capable of that exertion. But he did not see his way to any suggestion of the point at present, and merely answered,

"If Gower is at all like Lulworth it must deserve your praise, Miss Brereton: I spent a day or two at the little inn there is at the cove there last year and was enchanted. Have you been much of a traveller?"

"As far from it as possible," said Léonie; "excepting when I visit my Aunt in London this is almost the first new place I have seen. Papa himself never leaves home; he is a great reader, a mathematician and classical scholar, and I fancy that if he had his own choice he would never stir from his own library. He goes out on my account occasionally. I should so like to travel," Léonie added; "to go abroad, above everything."

"You would prefer cities to country, I imagine," said Reginald, glancing at some architectural copies in water-colours which lay on the table; "Rome, or Dresden, for instance, or even these Normandy towns, to Switzerland?"

"I am afraid I should," said Léonie; "it seems wicked to do so, but it is no use trying to mend one's inclinations. I like being where a number of

people are, even if I do not know them; observing them, and thinking what they are like in themselves, and what they have been doing all their life. That is why I liked copying those Normandy views, especially such old-world streets as those are; it is so interesting to look at the different windows and the balconies and ornamented doorways, and wonder what scenes have gone on in them all, and what sort of persons have lived there all these years past! Those are what I like doing best, though," continued Léonie, as Reginald, growing bolder by practice, took possession of a spirited sketch which peeped out from underneath the drawings he had first seen; "those boys' heads; I suppose it is for the same reason; it is so amusing to speculate what is inside them, and what their owners will rise to in after life."

"Speaking with entire truth, Miss Brereton," said Reginald, "I should expect that this urchin would rise very high indeed; I can almost see the noose round his throat already. It is an extremely clever drawing, but an extremely wicked little boy."

"So he is," said Léonie. "That is an original from Cocks Moor, as we call the ragged school in my Aunt's London district; I mean in the district where she lives; and this is the naughtiest child in the whole school; his name is Sammy. No, not the naughtiest child, either, only at the top of the bad boys; one of the girls is far beyond him in depravity. We had to send her away to the home at Bussage."

"That sounds bad," said Reginald; "almost as appalling to the mind as King Echetus."

"King who?"

"King Echetus. He comes in the 'Odyssey;' a sort of *bête noire* whom nobody knows anything about, but to whom all objectionable people are consigned, or receive an intimation that they will be. You see, Miss Brereton, I am as fond of the classics as your father."

"Oh! there is nothing very formidable about Bussage," said Léonie, to whom the misconception implied in their visitor's last words, even if noticed, was of too every-day occurrence to suggest any correction of it; "of course they are strict there, but it is giving poor Rachel a chance. Our last accounts of her are very satisfactory; she is developing some moral qualities, and is so fond of scrubbing that they threaten she shall lose her turn at it as a punishment."

"Do you visit much in London; I mean, among the poor people? I should have thought" And here Reginald made a sudden pause, conscious that by his precipitancy he had brought himself to the verge of a precipice, and must either draw back abruptly, or else intimate to the exceedingly pretty girl with whom he was conversing that he considered her good looks a disqualification for "district visiting."

Léonie's indifference as to her own personal attractions, however, coupled with her extreme sensitiveness on another point, tided over the difficulty. That she was pretty, probably a good deal more, Léonie accepted as a fact in the nature of other facts; as she accepted the gulf-stream, or the solar

system, or the proposition that two and two made four. But that she should be thought enthusiastic, or impulsive; above all, in any sense of the term implied or even literal, "young," was Léonie's special abhorrence: she shrunk from the imputation. Shrunk from it so much as occasionally to mislead, even as to the literal fact.

And she misled on the present occasion: not without results which will appear in the sequel.

"I know what you were about to say," she replied, laughingly;—under other circumstances, it might not have been without some resentment making itself apparent;—"you think I am not old enough for work of that kind. But really I am; much older than you suppose, probably; so much older, that being what I am in other respects, I had better not confess how much. And really, too, I have had a great deal of parochial duty, here and at home; Papa is quite good natured about it, and even in London my aunt has relented; so that, within certain limits, I do pretty much as I please."

"You are to be envied," said Reginald.

"In doing as I please, you mean? Of course I am; it is the perfection of human happiness."

"How stupid and gauche I am," thought Reginald to himself; "making some blunder every other sentence! And here besides this last one, I have been talking to her as if she were a school-girl, instead of being two or three and twenty, as she evidently is; a year my senior, at least!"

So Reginald, more abashed than ever, answered meekly,

"Pray forgive me. I have no sisters, and hardly ever go into society; and I say and do such foolish things. What I really meant was that I envied you the work you speak of. It is the noblest that man or woman can do."

"I did it very awkwardly when I began," said Léonie; "the first poor old woman I ever visited was laid up in bed with rheumatism, I remember, and I went and sat down upon her toes. Oh! here is Aunt!"

Miss Lester entered, and Reginald was formally introduced by name, supplementing what had been defective on their meeting in Kensington Gardens two years before.

"Aunt, what do you think? Mr. Mansel wrote this," was the introduction which rushed to Léonie's lips; and she actually had her hand on the "crown octavo volume" with that view. But the recent imputation on her youth, as she supposed it to be, flashed across her in time; and she acquiesced in a less unconventional mode of presenting their visitor.

Some unimportant conversation followed, and then Reginald took his departure.

But he did not depart from Swanage, as he had proposed doing as soon as this visit of ceremony was over. On the contrary, he lingered on there, day after day. Days beginning to be counted by weeks now. Passing by more than one week the fortnight which had been the original term of his holiday.

How should he not?

The quarry-stones on the quay were magnets and drew him. The fishing-lines were ropes of glamour and bound him. The sea-waves murmured "Léonie" to him all day long. Every thought, every pulsation of his being was all Léonie!

Just the same, too, whether they met or not during this period of suspended consciousness. When it did happen that they were together, which by a succession of unaccountable accidents happened pretty frequently, there was the objective fact, the actual, tangible Léonie; tangible, that is, to the extent of shaking hands with her at meeting, and repeating the process at leave-taking. And when they were apart, it seemed to make no difference; there she was, all the same.

Not tangible now for any purpose; but visible and audible tenfold; echoed in every sound, identified with every sight. A presence within himself. A world in which everything which was not himself was Léonie!

Leaving Reginald thus occupied, we must narrate shortly how matters had been going on at Ceniarth in the meanwhile.

CHAPTER IX.

THE account of Mrs. Ponsonby which Léonie had given Hatty Delacombe shortly after the disaster at Ceniarth a year and a half before was quite correct.

Mrs. Ponsonby had become a devotee, in the least favourable sense of the term.

It was the result of temperament with her that this should ensue. She was timid, constitutionally so; timid, especially, in all matters of right and wrong; but her timidity had a singular effect. It in no way deterred her from doing wrong, far from it. But whenever she did transgress, and unscrupulous in other respects as her transgression might be, it was always attended with severe twinges of conscience; as well during the action as after it.

In the present instance, the calamity which had overtaken Alice and to which Mrs. Ponsonby had so mainly contributed, aroused this quality in the highest degree. She was utterly terrified by a result so unexpected and fatal. Not, at first, in the way of mere personal apprehension: fear of the present consequences to herself. What she at first felt was remorse; the burden of a great guilt lay upon her.

Nobody is wholly depraved, all at once; and the feelings which Mrs. Ponsonby now experienced represented such feeble capacity for good as she

still retained. A future of retribution loomed before her view; day and night the cry, as of an innocent, drowning girl, doomed by the malicious slander which Mrs. Ponsonby had concocted, rang in her ears; conscience woke in quick torment, baring her soul to its depths, shaking over her the avenging lash. True, she had not intended what had happened, but did that exculpate her; would that plea be admitted at a still higher tribunal?

Certainly not, as far as the wickedness of the act went; Mrs. Ponsonby felt that, instinctively. But meanwhile, and for present purposes, the plea did come to her aid. She must do something. It was the first time she had ever experienced such sensations; she wished she were an infidel like Sir Edgar, and made some feeble attempts to become such, but wholly without result; the uncomfortable feeling threatened to become permanent: she must find some remedy for it. And in so doing, as between herself and conscience, Mrs. Ponsonby by degrees found that the excuse of non-intention did help her; abated the worst urgency of the attack.

It did more in fact; it set her upon a compromise. In the first sharpness of the visitation, conscience had opened out to her view more than one unpleasant fact in regard to herself, over and above the crowning act which had led to its interposition. It had suggested, amongst other things, the neglect of certain external duties of religion, in the performance of which Mrs. Ponsonby had of late become more and more lax. Now, she admitted to herself that some atonement was necessary for the wrong

she had done;—"the late melancholy occurrence," as she began already to euphemise it to her own mind;—and here were the means. To be sure, yes. On reflection, this was the special shortcoming which had presented itself to her, the root, as it were, of all the rest: sedulousness in this for the future would compensate for a great deal! Let her try.

So Mrs. Ponsonby, remaining, as Léonie had correctly seen, precisely the same woman in all respects that she was before, became externally a model of devotion. Lookers-on were surprised at the change. Some, less clear-sighted than Léonie, attributed it to grief for Alice's loss, and sympathised accordingly. Others, who were aware of the relation which had subsisted between the two, found this impossible, and expressed themselves simply perplexed.

But whatever the sentiments of others might be, Mrs. Ponsonby pursued her own course, and derived unquestionable advantage.

At first, these new observances confined themselves within the limits of the Establishment, as far, at least, as Sunday went. She became devout and exemplary at Trecoed church, much to the delight of Mr. Delacombe, who had not the grounds of knowledge which Hatty possessed, and was only too pleased with such an accession to his congregation.

After some little time, however, Mrs. Ponsonby felt the necessity for more active treatment. Trecoed church, with its thoughtful, short sermon, and a service in which Sunday was only one day, although the best day, out of seven, seemed to lack

stimulant. The old remorse began to make itself felt again; the leper-spot had broken out anew; a more powerful antidote must be employed.

Mrs. Ponsonby increased the dose in two ways. She became more starched than ever in a domestic ritual of such severity that the Ceniarth household groaned under it, and threw out hints of resigning; the matter being compromised at last by a re-adjustment of the dietary in the servants' hall on a scale even more liberal than heretofore.

And then, Mrs. Ponsonby changed her own Sabbathical place of worship. A few Sundays of an experimental character were passed in an adjoining parish under the ministry of the Reverend Pomford Price, to whom Léonie entertained such rooted objections. After this, Mrs. Ponsonby forsook the Establishment altogether and was driven over every Sunday to the Independent chapel in Swansea, where she partook of strong meat enough to carry her through the ensuing six days.

Eventually this answered its purpose. When Mrs. Ponsonby begun her course of devotion she had clung to it like a plank in a shipwreck: the Judas-kiss, the hateful treachery she had practised still hung to her lips, as it were; the terror, the dismay, had an actual punitive existence. But as time wore on, these sensations disappeared; in fact, the antidote not only did its work as such, but brought a positive satisfaction with it. Gradually, Mrs. Ponsonby began to feel herself, in some sort, one of the salt of the earth. The savour of her chapel-going not only interpenetrated her own past

and present, but was diffusive of its influence in other quarters, winning here and there a proselyte whose accession Mrs. Ponsonby hailed with fervour, and in her reckonings with conscience put it to the credit side.

Is this unnatural? Is it not rather the veriest truth?

Let any softening element accompany such a change as we have described; let feeling move, however imperfectly, in the right direction, and it is not true. Even the most ascetic devotion resulting from this, although possibly mistaken in some of its incidents, will still contain the germs of amendment; will, at any rate, be wholly incompatible, while it lasts, with a continuance in the evil which it in terms disclaims. But let the change be due to agencies of another kind, selfish fear, remorse, or the like, and the result will then be widely different; the external devotion which these may, and often do prompt, is a formalism, not merely valueless for good, but re-acting fatally on the heart and character; driving both forward into depths of more appalling wickedness. It is like the effect ascribed in some old story-books to reciting a certain very solemn prayer backwards!

Mrs. Ponsonby, at all events, went rapidly from bad to worse. Let the declension be here succinctly traced; it exercises a material influence on the sequel of our narrative.

As we have said, even in the inception of her present devotee life, if we may so call it, Mrs. Ponsonby remained, in herself, in all points esoteric

to the observances she now practised, the same woman that she always was; wholly unchanged for the better in any way. One circumstance of identity was specially marked; she resolved to reap to the very uttermost the harvest of her evil-doing.

Would she not do so, indeed! Here was the game before her. Alice out of the way; Percy Delacombe out of the way; Léonie, in virtue of the testamentary disposition which Sir Edgar had now adopted, and of which he made no secret, the destined successor to his whole property; everything hitherto, exactly as she would have arranged it to happen had the arrangement lain in her own power. Intolerable to throw up the cards now! Why have done what she did at all; why be going through this troublesome expiation, purchasing her "indulgence," as it might be termed, at such a cost, if no use were to be made of it; if the position were to be left barren of results?

No: it should not be. Let her communicate with Stephen.

So Mrs. Ponsonby accordingly did; not so very long after the catastrophe to Alice, in fact; two or three weeks, perhaps, not more. Even thus early in her penitence, as she was in the habit of regarding it, she had progressed as far as this; mastered the accidence of self-imposture!

Stephen replied, and the matter thenceforth became the subject of open and frequent correspondence between them; the only reserve being that Mrs. Ponsonby did not disclose the part she had herself taken in bringing about the present state of

facts. As regarded Stephen, her suggestions met with his entire approval. The circumstances were now so altered that, in any case, he would have thought well of the plan which, in its first crude conception, and with the then chances against it, he had entertained coldly enough. But, besides this, the flame which Léonie's beauty had kindled in him, and which still burnt as actively as ever, left him no choice. Certainly he would prosecute his suit to her as and when he might!

At Ceniarth this was of course hopeless, and Stephen did not attempt it. But on Léonie's becoming a permanent inmate in her aunt's house at Bayswater, Stephen Ponsonby had an improved chance, and he did not fail to make use of it. He was a shrewd man indeed, and had quite perception enough of Léonie's character, as well of the disadvantage at which his own mature years placed him as a lover, not to press his suit unduly. Still, on one pretence or another, he contrived occasionally to penetrate to the small drawing-room which enshrined the object of his regard, and bask for a few minutes in the sunshine which she diffused round it. This was, of course, anterior to the Swanage visit. Léonie had been resident at Bayswater for some months before this latter; and during this period Stephen Ponsonby had persevered in offering such attentions as he thought it safe to pay in the present state of affairs.

Had they prospered?

It was hard for Stephen to judge.

With Miss Lester he had not prospered at all;

quite the reverse. She had never liked him; entertained for him feelings the very reverse of liking; the oftener he showed himself the more adverse became her sentiments. Why he came to the house at all, Miss Lester, who was dull of apprehension, could not divine. He was a man of business, whom she had sent for upon business; and, according to the maxims of a printed card which the late Dean Alford always displayed upon his library mantelpiece, he ought to have called only in business hours, and spoken of nothing which was not business. Instead of which, Stephen had contracted a habit, so far as his exceptional visitations could be called such, of dropping in at wholly irregular times, and diverging into utterances which had no legal or even commercial significance whatever.

On the whole, Miss Lester found her new visitor objectionable. The depths of his presumption she had not fathomed, but she thought he did presume: and if he could have been disposed of at the bottom of the Red Sea, or subaqueously or subterraneously anywhere, she would have felt relieved.

As to Léonie, she retained some childish liking for Stephen; a half-surface, half-real gratitude for the one or two occasions at Ceniarth on which he had in former years intervened between her and Mrs. Ponsonby. But Léonie felt less of this than she had done a few months previously: the child-nature was rapidly developing into something stronger and deeper. The good-natured friend and intercessor of thirteen, as her girlish memories recalled him, was now seen, with her added years

upon her, and with the observation of character which they had brought, as a middle-aged, heavy man; relieved from commonplace only by some manifestations of an undue selfishness, and by a *tendresse* of manner at times at which Léonie, who had no suspicion that she was herself the cause of it, found it difficult to refrain from laughing.

Had this been the whole, Léonie's estimate of Stephen's visits would have coincided with her aunt's; she would have found them a simple nuisance, and probably have allowed the visitor to discover that she did so.

But a happy inspiration saved him from this catastrophe. Stephen was a resident in Léonie's "district," and with his business habits and connection had the power of giving her practical help in what she undertook. He did so, usefully and unofficially, and a new association, as far as it went, was thus established between them; something, at all events, which just kept matters going.

Even so, however, there were times when Stephen was utterly out of heart; conscious that he was making no progress; that the object of his affections remained in total ignorance of them, and, what was more galling, that if she had surmised them he would probably have received his immediate congé.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Ponsonby began to experience disquietudes of her own. Speaking more correctly, one great disquietude. So great and so serious that at times it thrust out of her memory all that Stephen was doing or might do; buried it in an oblivion as complete as if he and Léonie, the Ceniarth succes-

sion and Mrs. Ponsonby's own prospects in connection with the latter had belonged to the period of the Heptarchy!

Mrs. Ponsonby became the victim of an overpowering personal fear. It arose, in the first instance, from a conversation which took place between Sir Edgar and Hatty Delacombe, some months after Léonie had left Ceniarth for her aunt's home, and which shall be related in the next chapter.

CHAPTER X.

"SIR EDGAR would always soonest be in his library," Léonie had told Reginald. She spoke according to her knowledge, of course, and with special reference to his having, on her account, mixed more in society during the last few years; presumably with some violence to his own inclinations in this particular. As a corroborative fact, too, since Alice's loss Sir Edgar had almost entirely secluded himself in that apartment: frequently ordering his meals to be brought there, and hardly quitting it for days together.

But Léonie would have changed her opinion on this matter, or at all events, her phrase in regard to it, if she could have seen Sir Edgar alone in the library for one half-hour of the many scores which he spent there.

He dreaded the room and everything in it! The panelled walls; the book-shelves; the engravings; the carved fire-place; the hangings; the furniture; he dreaded, almost loathed them all. And yet, he found himself bound to the place hand and foot; compelled to the contact and sight of these very objects, every day and all day long, by a fascination which he was wholly powerless to resist!

Bound, above all, to one thing in the apartment, although at the same time it was the one which he

shrank from the most of all. What was the good of his shrinking? he could not keep away from it!

That window from which he had watched Alice's departure on the evening of her loss! Enter the library who would and when they would, Sir Edgar was always found standing at that window; usually with some half-uttered excuse in explanation of his being there. Force himself from it he might, he often did, in sheer weariness. Busied himself with books and writing. Placed his chair so as to make it impossible for him to see it.

But it was quite useless. Something would draw him back to the spot again; still to gaze through the sash with that abstracted, purposeless air, as it appeared to those who found him thus occupied; still to see from it, what they could not see, the figure of the trembling girl who was always crossing the lawn in front of him!

Léonie would have been shocked on another account too if she had seen Sir Edgar at the time of which we now write. He was greatly broken, in body as well as mind; as regarded the former, perceptibly so. From a stalwart man, in the prime of life, he had sunk within a few months into absolute decrepitude; was bowed, shrunken, the cheeks hollow and flushed, the hair, which had been iron-grey, now almost totally white. Never had grief written itself more legibly on any face and figure:—so thought the few persons who now saw Sir Edgar, and were ignorant of the still deeper reasons which existed for the alteration.

Among these latter, at length, was Sir Edgar's

medical attendant. The family doctor, rather, not his own; from childhood upward Sir Edgar had known neither ache nor ail which lay within the province of leech-craft. But he was compelled to ask its succour now; and many and urgent were the remonstrances of the professional man whom he called in. Change of scene; change of diet; society; air, exercise: these were the remedies his patient must employ; should he not do so, his life might pay the forfeit.

Sir Edgar would not quit Ceniarth, and would not enter into society; probably was incapable of doing so. Some alteration he made in other respects. Lived more according to rule; occasionally rode, still more frequently walked out.

But always one walk. Always that which led to Trecoed village.

The roadway that is; not the foot-path by the bridge. The latter was still in the ruinous state in which the accident had left it: the supports of the wooden framework which had been carried away still swaying over the stream; the piers on either side still crumbling and decayed, although from the removal of the pressure upon them they were now more secure, and might probably remain for years without further injury.

Not the foot-path by the bridge, viewed as a communication between Ceniarth and the village; there was of course no communication that way now: every one went by the road, and so did Sir Edgar. And yet, as soon as he had reached the village, he invariably went down to the bridge.

Crossing the stile into the meadows. Following the path beyond it, as if it had been still feasible to return that way. Following it to the edge of the stream; to the ruinous pier on that side.

There he would stand, hour by hour, looking down at the water, but apparently hardly seeing even that: straining his eyes upon some object in it, as he was in the habit of doing from the library window upon that moving figure on the lawn; seeing the same figure now, at one time stretching out its arms as if imploring succour, at another, whirled helplessly and unresistingly along the current!

And thus he would remain while daylight lasted, bound hand and foot, entranced as it were; incapable by any effort of forcing himself from the spot. Could the external features of the scene have undergone no change, it seemed as if Sir Edgar would have remained without change also.

But dusk always came to his aid. As the shadows lengthened and surrounding objects grew indistinct, he would recover his perception of where he was, and, starting from his reverie, hurriedly regain the road; almost trembling as he did so. There was something in the place which forbade his remaining there after dusk had fallen; struggle against it as he would, it over-mastered him.

"Wretched weakness;" he exclaimed more than once on these occasions, as an impulse which he despised but could not resist hurried him from the spot; "wretched superstition! What have these crumbling stones, these evidences of disaster and ruin, to do with me? did I cause either? Why do

I go there at all? why, still more, fly from the place, like a scared child, directly the sun is down? The worst, the most degrading folly of all, that is! Think if the rustics here were to be told that there is a portion of his own grounds which the owner of Ceniarth can only visit by daylight! And yet, I cannot get rid of this folly! I can analyse, refute, state fifty reasons against it, but there it is, all the same: I cannot lose it! But I will; I will. Men with the poison of hydrophobia coursing in their veins, have forced themselves to the water's edge, forced themselves to touch, to drink it; why cannot I exert the same power? Was I wrong? Was it my fault, in any sense? Was she not, by her own vile consent, a leprous outcast from love and trust, from home and kindred? And what did I do but exclude the leper? Her own Bible taught me that. The wretch might have starved in his elephantiasis, been torn by dogs or bleached by frosts outside the gate, and yet there was to be no mercy, not from his nearest and dearest; and what have I done more? I defy this jugglery!"

It was on Sir Edgar's return from one of these walks, if such they could be called, and when his thoughts were busied with some such reflections as we have just sketched, the sophistries of the atheist striving to shut out the guilt which his moral sense denounced irrespective of all creeds, that Sir Edgar met Hatty Delacombe. She was on her way back, somewhat late, to the vicarage. Since Alice's loss, and during the lengthened visit which Léonie was now paying in London, village matters had devolved

upon her exclusively, and some charge of the kind had detained her now. When they met, Sir Edgar had just crossed the stile from the meadows into the main road.

Sir Edgar liked Hatty; her outspokenness suited his temperament. She was one of the very few persons,—he would have been puzzled, in fact, to name another—whom he would have cared to meet at all under existing circumstances. But he was pleased to have met her.

Pleased. And yet, side by side with this feeling of satisfaction that he should have her company on his desolate walk home; side by side with it at first, and then bearing it to the ground, over-mastering it, was a wholly different one.

The brother; Percy; the evil-doer. Was he not at the bottom of the anguish which Sir Edgar thus underwent day after day? If she, Alice, had gone wrong, not in any commonplace sense, but in the sense in which it was death that a daughter of his own should have done so, was not Percy Delacombe the seducer?

True, Sir Edgar had never yet brought any specific charge against Percy. His promise to Mrs. Ponsonby, coupled, no doubt, with . . . with that other matter, had sealed his mouth; when Léonie reported that her engagement was at an end, as he was perfectly aware it was, he had received the news almost without comment. But, in so doing, he had been himself made the scape-goat; all this misery he was undergoing was Percy's act, not his

own. Let him brave it out, lay the blame on the shoulders which ought to bear it.

Not for the offender's sake, or Hatty's either; what did he care about them? What he needed was to get rid of this cowardly self-accusation; to justify himself to himself! Let him try.

He turned upon Hatty almost fiercely. He had not met her for some weeks, months in fact; hardly since the accident to Alice occurred.

"You are as sedulous in good works as ever, Miss Delacombe," he said, speaking in a tone of bitter irony. "They are profitable both to the giver and the receiver, I think your sacred volume states, or something to that effect. I can quite believe it."

Hatty turned and looked at her companion in the imperfect light, although at first without replying. Her first emotion on seeing him had been that of extreme compassion: pity for the bent frame and evidently broken health which she saw even by that light; for the loneliness of the bereaved father; still more, for the calamity which, little as his past treatment of Alice had deserved any better fate, had cut off all hopes of happier relations between them. Such were the first thoughts which rose in Hatty's mind, ignorant as she of course was of Sir Edgar's actual complicity in the fatal result, and even of his having imposed upon Alice sentence of banishment from her home.

Sir Edgar's present tone, however, sensibly modified these feelings of Hatty's; and it was only her surprise at being thus accosted which prevented her

replying at once, and with some animation. Seeing that she did not do so, Sir Edgar continued.

"On reflection," he said, "I believe I am wrong. The sentiment to which I referred occurs, I fancy, in Shakespeare; a less distinguished authority, but one who has unmasked some hypocrisies in his time. I have no doubt he had an eye upon Christian charity, as it is called."

"I do not understand you, Sir Edgar," said Hatty, whose heart was swelling more and more as her companion proceeded.

"I am disposed to think that from your personal knowledge you do not," said the baronet. "But I fear that professors in general are better instructed; they fully appreciate the double aspect, the front and obverse of almsgiving, and parish visiting, and Dorcas societies, and the like. Dorcas means gazelle, by the way; why can't you call your gatherings so? it would be much prettier."

Hatty still remained silent from a total incapacity to shape her feelings into words, and Sir Edgar continued.

"The profit to the receiver, Miss Delacombe, I need not insist upon; it is obvious enough: what I am concerned with is that which accrues to the giver. Plenty of it, no doubt, in that somewhat Mohammedan future state of yours: but I mean, in the present. The blessing of an easy conscience, for instance, is one of these benefits. A conscience, to particularise still further, which will empty some coins into a silver-gilt plate in church every Sunday—the offertory is the technical term, is it not?—

with great unction, but be wholly indifferent as to wronging the love of a confiding girl on the intervening week-days!"

"If your words have any personal reference, Sir Edgar," said Hatty, "I beg you will speak plainly."

"Certainly not personal, Miss Delacombe; not in the ordinary sense of the term; it does suggest a rather bad pun, but I abstain from making it. I will only intimate that there is a member of your family to whom my remarks may not be wholly inapplicable."

"If you mean my brother . . ." said Hatty, almost sobbing in her grief and vexation.

"My thoughts did point in that direction, certainly," said Sir Edgar. "I believe he is what is called a pious young man, as to which I do not profess to have much knowledge. But I do know that he engaged himself to my daughter,"—there was perhaps a second's pause before Sir Edgar pronounced the word; but he did speak it, quite steadily,—“to my daughter Léonie, and that without any shadow of a reason he broke off the engagement. Eminently Christian, of course.”

What should Hatty say?

Her whole heart burnt within her to confront this hard man, so little touched by the sorrow to which she had been prepared herself to accord such earnest sympathy; she longed to tell him all, to prove how blameless Percy had been in the matter! But could she, even with this object, betray the confidence which the latter had placed in her?

No; Hatty would not do this. She contented herself with answering, "The engagement was broken off by mutual consent."

"Yes," said Sir Edgar sarcastically. "When a poor girl's heart is broken, or something like it, it is easy then for the Lothario, the gentleman who has found some more attractive wares elsewhere in the meantime, to snap the ring which he had placed on her finger. She will surrender the symbol easily enough, when the reality is gone; poor Léonie had pride enough for that."

"You are as wrong as it is possible to be, Sir Edgar," said Hatty, who had with difficulty restrained herself until her companion concluded. "Léonie's heart was not broken, or anything like it; I was the medium of the communication between her and Percy, and although I will not tell you what did pass, I am at liberty to tell you thus much. They parted with Léonie's entire free-will. They have continued friends, continued to correspond, ever since; the extreme grief she felt at the time arose from a wholly different cause, from a loss which I should think you, as a father, might make more account of than you seem to do. As to Percy, what you say of him is false, wholly false; it is, Sir Edgar; you know it is!" And here Hatty fairly burst into tears.

"I regret that I cannot accept your charitable estimate of my veracity, Miss Delacombe," answered her companion: "I would do so if I could; if only to gratify so zealous an advocate, but I cannot. The fact is that I know the whole history of that

matter. To echo your phrase just now, I am not at liberty to tell you all about it; but I may state thus much, that your brother's desertion of Léonie *was* caused by his having pleased himself better elsewhere. The only excuse for him is that it may not have been his own doing altogether: young men are drawn into such things occasionally. Assuming, for argument's sake, that Mr. Percy's new love was . . . was the vile girl to whom you referred just now, I think it highly probable . . ."

"I will not listen, Sir Edgar, I will not listen," interrupted Hatty; "it is too shameful. Shameful! No, not that; too terrible! The wrong, the cruel wicked wrong of what you have just said cannot harm your daughter now; she has passed beyond your power, thank Heaven. But for you to have uttered them is awful. 'Know the whole history of the matter,' did you say?—You do not know it, Sir Edgar, that is quite certain. You are not a madman; and none else, with that knowledge, could have spoken as you have done. You do not know it; you do not suspect it; I will not be so merciless as to tell you; I dare not, even if I might. But, if you ever should come to hear it, may God help you; for man never can! We will part now, if you please."

Hatty walked forward at a rapid pace, Sir Edgar not attempting to follow her. Not moving from the spot where he stood.

Somewhere, in the depths of his heart, there rose up a terrible apprehension. Was there any mistake; any explanatory circumstance; anything

which, as Hatty said, he did not know? Could it be, could it be, that Alice was less culpable than he had supposed: perhaps not culpable in any sense? And, if so . . .

Like the patriarch of old, Sir Edgar trembled exceedingly. He could not answer the question which had risen to his lips; could not frame even the question itself. It was agony. With the apprehension, had broken upon him a tide of new emotions, the long pent-up feelings of the father; every barrier by which he had forced these back failed him now; every act and word of cruelty, of coldness, of aversion, every shadow which he had flung upon that young life, so ruthlessly, so systematically, rose in torture before him. And now, had he added this to all? Reft the life from him by his own deed; doomed to destruction, of express choice and set purpose, the fair, pleading girl who was not only his own child, but was also innocent of the charge for which he had sentenced her? Had he done this?

No: it should not be. Let him see his informant, the author of the charge, at once; hear it over again; ascertain that the fact was as he had believed at the time; that he was troubling himself needlessly, that the sentence was quite righteous, quite just!

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. PONSONBY was startled when Sir Edgar, who, on coming to the decision mentioned at the end of the last chapter, had hurried back to Ceniarth with all speed, sent to desire her immediate presence in the library. But she was still more perturbed when she learnt the object of the summons. When her brother-in-law, after stating something, although by no means the whole of his late conversation with Hatty, looked full at her, and asked, in a voice tremulous with its eagerness, "Was she quite sure; sure of what she had seen that day; that there was no mistake?"

Sir Edgar did not speak angrily; far enough from it.

With his newly-awakened feelings he thought nothing of Mrs. Ponsonby's share in the matter. He thought only of two things; himself, and Alice. His hateful, murderous act, as it would have been if any mistake had occurred; perhaps even,—ah! he dared not go into that! Her, as she had looked when she last spoke with him, standing where Mrs. Ponsonby now did.

If he might only recall that time! Might only, as that was impossible, hear at least that he had not been the victim of a delusion so fatal, so irretrievable!

Angry! No, indeed! Sir Edgar watched with too trembling anxiety for his companion's answer to experience emotions of that kind. His gaze rested upon her, not as having any personal concern in his question, but as the oracle-giver whose answer was to decide his fate!

But to Mrs. Ponsonby the matter wore a very different aspect. She thought exclusively of herself. Of the falsehood she had uttered. The results which had followed it. The vengeance which Sir Edgar would take, should it be detected!

It was the beginning of the end; the crisis of an evil life, implanting in it the hitherto unfelt force which would germinate in ruin and disaster!

For the present, Mrs. Ponsonby, as was to be expected, held by her story as originally told. As soon as she could collect herself from her first agitation, she went over, as before, the details of what she had seen during Alice's swoon, or such portion of them as it suited her purpose to communicate; suppressing the rest, and also carefully abstaining from any mention of the words which had fallen from Percy on that occasion, and which would have given the real explanation of the whole occurrence.

As before too, she was not tried beyond the point of equivocation; her truth-telling remained intact.

When she had concluded, Sir Edgar asked a second time, "Was that all; nothing more; no chance that she might have been mistaken?" And again Mrs. Ponsonby, applying the question to the

facts so far as she had stated them, was able to reply in the negative. Sir Edgar then desisted, catching eagerly at the reprieve from the worst which was thus offered him; and for the present the matter terminated.

But for the present only.

In Sir Edgar's mind the doubt inspired by Hatty Delacombe's words still lingered. More than doubt. Impossible not to feel that her knowledge of what had passed was at least equal to his own; and that, in her own belief at any rate, she knew something of still greater moment; something, which if true, would convert him, Sir Edgar, from the austere judge into the felon and assassin. What was this?

From Mrs. Ponsonby he had learnt nothing, but he was still far from satisfied. Piece by piece, one fact here and another there, various circumstances occurred to him which gave colour to Hatty's statement: the friendly intercourse and correspondence which, as Hatty had stated, and as Sir Edgar was in fact aware, still subsisted between Léonie and Percy; the discrepancy between Alice's alleged conduct on this occasion and her whole previous character; the resentful, almost defiant manner which at their last interview Alice had for a moment assumed towards himself.

Even were she guilty, Sir Edgar now began to doubt whether he had not been over-hasty. And, were she not, what rocks could he pile over him; into what abyss of waters could he plunge, deep enough to cover his remorse and wretchedness? He

must track all this out; investigate the matter to the bitter end.

He would have gone at once to Hatty, ascertained from her, by command, by entreaty, the meaning of the language she had used. But Hatty was not at Trecoed now; she left it on a visit of several months soon after their interview. And Sir Edgar did not care to write. The anger, almost scorn which she had expressed at parting had left an impression upon him which put this out of the question. But he must find out somehow.

As regarded Mrs. Ponsonby, the feelings which her late interview with Sir Edgar had inspired were still farther from terminating with it. As we have said, it implanted in her a new element of action; an intense, uncontrollable *fear*!

She fought against this; argued that it was some accident. The shock of the unexpected disaster which had befallen Alice. Nerves. Weather. Anything which would assist her in shaking it off. But it would not be shaken off; it took a stronger hold of her every day.

Not the old remorse now; that had quite ceased; what had thus come in its place was wholly different; a personal, present apprehension. That of discovery!

Not on mere general grounds this, either; the anticipation of disgrace, exposure, loss of position, or the like, if the imposture she had palmed off upon Sir Edgar should ever come to light. Mrs. Ponsonby's alarm had a very specific object;—Sir Edgar himself.

She was not safe with him!

That the subject on which he had spoken to her so earnestly was still occupying him, she saw clearly; even if she had not made a point of ascertaining this, it would have forced itself upon her notice.

“Some mistake?” that was the question on which, in the seclusion of his own gloomy thoughts, he was still harping incessantly.

Yes; and how easily might he find out that there had been a mistake, and a very great one! Percy Delacombe was out of the country, fortunately but Hatty, although absent, was accessible. And Hatty did know something, apparently; might have heard the whole facts from her brother; so might others; who could tell? And if Sir Edgar should ever discover this; should discover that the mistake, so to call it, lay at Mrs. Ponsonby’s door, what would he do?

What would he not do? Had she lived with him all these years and not known that? Had he not thrust out his own daughter from the door at a minute’s notice; sent her forth afoot as an outcast, just as he had sent away her mother, and both for a far less offence than Mrs. Ponsonby’s would be? “Eye for eye,” “tooth for tooth;” that was his creed; and what would be its application in this case?

Life for life! Her life, hers who had passed the cheat upon him, for the daughter’s life which the cheat had sacrificed. Once let the discovery be made, as any day it might be made, and she was

doomed. Doomed, if she remained at Ceniarth. Doomed, if she fled from it. He would pursue her, hunt her down, overtake her; would claim his victim, go where she would. The horror of a great fear fell upon Mrs. Ponsonby!

A fear, and something beyond a fear; the penalty exacted by character, if we may personify so far, for the self-deceptions in which she had involved it. Something which, still more as time progressed, passed out of the precincts of controlled choice, of balanced judgment, of intelligible and sufficient motive. Passed into the gloomy regions in which the mind, rational on all points but one, hovers, in regard to that one, between insanity and its reverse. Passed, as the result of its own deliberate act,—for how much of mental malady is self-induced!—into the distorted apprehension, the dominant single thought, and concentrated purpose of the monomaniac!

Some months elapsed at Ceniarth, with little change in the relations of its inmates. Then, shortly before Léonie and Miss Lester went to Swanage, a change did take place; not so much an alteration in what had gone before, as its sequel and natural conclusion. Let this be briefly narrated in the close of the present chapter.

Stephen Ponsonby's communications with his mother had been far from frequent of late. The dread of Sir Edgar which the latter had now begun to entertain absorbed her whole faculties; in the pre-occupation arising from this, Stephen was left

to work out their joint undertaking by his unaided skill, as he best might.

And the best was far from good. Every day the conviction grew stronger that Léonie was wholly indifferent to him; that he was wasting his time, wasting his smiles and honied speeches; that if he were to continue his attentions for the remainder of his mortal existence, they would be wholly fruitless.

And when the Swanage trip was mooted, the conviction became a certainty. Not, in fact, mooted, but arranged; the day fixed, the preparations substantially made before he had heard that there was any project of the kind. But for an accidental visit paid by him a few evenings before they started, Dorsetshire would have been exchanged for Bayswater without his having any intimation that such a proceeding was even in contemplation!

Bad this, indeed!

So bad, that when Stephen finally realised it, he at once sat down and indited a sufficiently ill-natured letter to his parent. Throwing upon her the exclusive blame of his matrimonial projects having been undertaken at all, as well as of the failure in which they had now resulted. Apprising her of the impending visit to Swanage. Finally, supplementing these topics with various expressions of resentment against Mrs. Ponsonby as his adviser; against himself for having been advised; against Léonie, for making the advice nugatory; and against society and the world in general for the place he

occupied in them, and which he made no doubt had entirely caused his ill-success.

Of small importance all this, at least for our present purpose. What is material, is one sentence which Stephen, in the depth of his ill-humour, added to his letter after it had been completed; so long completed that he had perused the Times and digested its main contents in the interval.

"P.S.," he wrote. "I see in to-day's paper that young Delacombe is coming home; at least his ship is, and as one has not heard of his falling overboard, I conclude he is too. So now, of course, he and the girl will make up their difference, whatever it was, leaving me in the lurch altogether. Cheerful that, after making a fool of myself with her for the last six months.—S.P."

Mrs. Ponsonby took small note of the vexation with which Stephen wrote, or of the unquestionably good grounds which he had for doing so. But for the postscript to his letter, she would in twenty-four hours have been almost unconscious that she had received it.

But the postscript riveted her at once. "Young Delacombe coming home!"

He, the person whom she had last heard of as starting for the Antipodes, and who, to the best of her belief, was still there! The very person whose return to Trecoed she had most reason to dread; who held the master-key to the past, capable, at any moment, of throwing open its dark chambers, disclosing her own guilty complicity, leaving her at the mercy, if the term could be so ill-applied, of

her dreaded antagonist! This was terrible indeed; matter for the most anxious consideration.

Why, she was not safe for an instant! "Coming home!" It might be any day; Stephen had not said when; three or four weeks would probably be the outside limit, but she was not secure for as many hours!

Mrs. Ponsonby shuddered. The monomania, the overmastering, unreasoning *fear* seized on heart and brain; Sir Edgar's avenging figure dilated before her. Shame and reproach it would have been in an ordinary case; but with him it meant—death!

She had rehearsed all this before; we have said so; but the rehearsal and the performance were different things. The stage was cleared now, the scenes placed, the curtain about to rise, the drama ready to be played out:—she must act, must prevent this.

How?

Percy Delacombe? could he be prevented from coming to Trecoed; from speaking when he was there? Could his foot, his tongue be bound? Far beyond her reach that indeed. But was there nothing within her reach?

Sir Edgar himself. Was he not?

Supposing that he and Percy never did meet; that the lips which should have framed the enquiry never did frame it; that . . .

The thought, unexpressed in speech, ran through the distempered brain like quick fire. Life for life; that would be his code. And—*life against life* must be hers!

Assuming that it came to that, of course. Yes, of course; no need to decide, to . . . to arrange in any way for the present. In the present, she must be vigilant, wary, that was all; keep her eyes about her, as she had been fond of saying in quieter times.

It is singular what things people do see when they keep their eyes about them with a specific purpose. Rather, perhaps, under what an altered aspect they see them: how the purpose makes them phonic as it were, gives expression, intelligence, adaptation to them; assimilates them to its own substance; exhibits them, not as they are in themselves, but in relation to something else;—means to an end!

Pretty direct means too, if so desired, the object on which Mrs. Ponsonby's eyes; in her present perilous frame of mind, accidentally lighted the day after the arrival of Stephen's letter. Something which lay in Sir Edgar's dressing-room. Not close to the hand, but on an open shelf, at some height from the ground; placed there for security in the first instance, no doubt, and apparently long since forgotten.

Externally, indeed, not much to look at. A labelled paper packet, merely, tied up with string; a portion of the contents had evidently been used at some past time, and the packet had then been loosely folded up again and laid aside.

And the contents?

Well, nothing uncommon, or in itself very for-

midable, even in them. A poison, doubtless, but one frequently kept in private houses. Scrupulously locked up by the timorous or conscientious. Left unprotected, or with some such counterfeit of precaution as had been employed in this instance, by their opposites. Used for domestic purposes, often enough; occasionally, and in small doses, as a medicine, or for other legitimate personal uses.

Yes. But increase the habitual dose, and you have then a different agent! A malignant, stealthy foe to existence; eating it out day by day, corroding, wasting, harrowing. And, increase any one dose beyond a certain point, and the result is immediate then; the house of life broken into, not on the moment, indeed, but before the shadow has marked off many hour-strokes on the dial, hopelessly, remorselessly!

Alas! even for this latter purpose, a frequent agent also. The annals of crime teem; teem in all ranks, upper as well as lower. Who shall venture to class them as "sensational;" to exclude their dark tragedies, in the face of daily and hourly witness to the contrary, in contradiction of the poet-teaching of all time, Shakspeare equally with Euripides, the "Hamlet" with the "Medea," from a truly-drawn portraiture of human life? Crime teems. The assassin or the poisoner may jostle us in the street; may crouch in the bed-chamber beside us; may be, given motive enough and habituation in wrong enough, — perhaps infirmity of the jaded and worn brain enough, — our own future self; idle to ignore it. And among the implements of crime, this drug,

although telling its own tale, is the most easy, the most obvious.

Nothing calling for much notice, as far as itself was concerned, in the packet which Mrs. Ponsonby saw before her in the dressing-room. What was noticeable was the effect which it produced upon her.

The immediate suggestion of it as an agent in a possible, or rather highly probable, contingency; the suggestion, and the acceptance?

No; at the point which she had reached, these followed pretty naturally. What had some speciality about it, was the effect which the resolution she thus came to produced upon Mrs. Ponsonby herself; upon the mind thus fatally distorted.

A complex effect.

It made her, on the one hand, very thankful for the opportune assistance which had thus presented itself; really, and so to speak, devoutly thankful for it. She was alone, unobserved at the moment;—she carefully ascertained that; secure from interruption of any kind: let her inspect it more closely. The packet was easily reached. Mrs. Ponsonby took it down, slightly displaced the string; unfastened the end which had been previously opened, not entirely, but sufficiently to ascertain that the contents were really what they purported to be; then, when this was satisfactorily settled to her own mind, in the fulness of her heart murmured something over it. Mrs. Ponsonby's utterances, since her recent change of habits, were frequently of a prayerful nature:—perhaps this was a prayer: who knows?

People in their soberest and soundest wits, as far as the intellectual capacity went, have supplicated, interceded, invoked or pronounced blessings, under circumstances quite as startling; and why not Mrs. Ponsonby? Let it be.

But this was not the only phase of feeling she went through. In spite of her gratitude to the friendly packet, she did not care to keep it in her hands very long. She became frightened at it. Not at the risk, of which there was in fact none at all, of her being found handling it; but at the thing itself. It began to have a strange, wondering terror for her! Such as might have resulted if the utterance to which she had just given vent had been some charm, inadvertently pronounced, but investing the inanimate substance with new properties; giving it vitality, volition, a force not only external to her own, but superior to it; something which she must henceforth—obey!

With a hurried movement, Mrs. Ponsonby replaced the parcel on the shelf; not exactly in the position it had before occupied, but further back, although still just within sight.

Just so much in sight, that she might, on entering the room at any time, at once ascertain that it was there; and yet, not be compelled to see more of it than was indispensable for that purpose.

Like some idol-worshipper, Mrs. Ponsonby shuddered at the gloomy divinity she had created, even while she abated it no item of her heart's devotion!

CHAPTER XII.

LÉONIE and Reginald Mansel, once more.

What a pity it is that a novel from beginning to end cannot be all love-making!

Tired of it?

No, you wouldn't be. Not if it were judiciously handled; and if you had ever made love yourself, or been made love to, or were prepared for one or the other, as the case might be: perhaps that is a necessary condition.

At all events, to those actually concerned in the process there is nothing on the face of the globe half so pleasant. There are pleasant things in life, with all its drawbacks. There is Alpine climbing, for instance. Salmon, followed by roast duck and asparagus. A header in summer into fifteen feet of a chalk-river, gurgling and bubbling up under the hatches. One's first counsel's fee. Heading the poll at an election. A legacy. An old coat and slippers. But all these satisfactions put together are not half so delightful as making love.

Well, Reginald and Léonie have been enjoying this pastime since we were last in their company. Pretty obvious from the antecedents that this would be the sequel; and a very agreeable one it has been, upon the whole.

Not open and avowed courtship, indeed. People

now-a-days do not sit down and besiege the fortress by regular approaches until it capitulates. Besides, the very key-stone of Reginald's prolonged stay at Swanage, as he assures himself half-a-dozen times a day, is that he is not, in the remotest possibilities of thought, aspiring to Léonie's hand or heart either. Love her he must, while the blood runs in his veins or the breath animates his body; but any avowal of his love, any hope of winning her in return,—presumptuous madness! He what he is; and she, a baronet's daughter, and one of the fairest beings that ever trod the earth into the bargain;—worse than madness, actual profanation!

No. For all time to come his passion must be buried in his own heart; not a murmur of it escape; as far as this topic goes, complete La Trappeism. But for the fixity of this resolution it would of course be foolish in him, almost wrong, to permit himself the indulgence of Léonie's further society. But, being the resolution it is, firm as the Pyramids, there is no reason why he should forego this deep draught of joy in the meantime. It will be over quite soon enough.

As regarded Léonie herself, she was, as of maidenhood behoved her to be, still further from realising in any express form of recognition the nature of her present occupation. She was conscious of some great change, something which had made a wholly different thing of existence; but she did not analyse what this was. If, within herself, new mines of thought and feeling had opened out, vault after vault and gallery after gallery, radiant with light

and beauty; if, in the outer world, the stars shone, the sea sparkled, the flowers bloomed, as they might have done in the creation-dawn of all things but had certainly never done since; if the most trivial objects had interest about them now, the most ordinary sounds voice and music, she did not probe the matter deeper. There was the fact. And there was Reginald as another fact. And the two had thus much of connection, that the change, in herself and externally to herself, had taken place since they first met on the Swanage beach. But whence this came, or in what it was eventually to issue, Léonie did not concern herself to enquire.

And thus, side by side and hand in hand, they wandered on through the enchanted garden, amid the fern-grottoes and the plashing fountains; carolled to by sweet birds, steeped in fragrance from ambrosial groves; weaving as they went, from leaf and blossom, the joy-wreath which is imperishable, the mystery-life of heart linked with heart!

"Léonie, my dear," said Miss Lester in the drawing-room at St. Clare, about four weeks after Reginald's arrival at Swanage.

"Yes, Aunt," said the niece, looking up from a volume of Matthew Arnold's poetry in which she was absorbed, and of which she had recently made the acquaintance, as matter of actual perusal, under Reginald's auspices.

"Have you any idea what Mr. Mansel is: I mean, besides his being an author?"

"He is a biped, Aunt," said Léonie, bending over her volume again; although its stately Homeric verse had perhaps less to do with the movement than a rapid flush which had risen to the speaker's cheek and brow at Miss Lester's question, and which she felt the necessity for concealing. The necessity, as well as the flush, were among the numerous facts of her present existence which Léonie accepted as such, without caring to enquire too particularly into their causes!

"I suppose I could have discovered that for myself," said the gentle little lady, smiling. "What I meant was about his family, and connections. Has he ever spoken to you about them?"

"Never, Aunt," said Léonie; "he may be connected with the King of Dahomey, but it has not transpired yet. He never does talk about himself."

"No, he does not," said Miss Lester; "I have often noticed it; it is very different to most of the young men one meets now-a-days. Still, it seems curious that we have seen him so frequently, and yet know nothing about him: not even his Christian name; at least I do not. I suppose it is Richard, or Robert; he had R. on his card, I remember."

"For shame, you wicked old aunt," exclaimed Léonie, indignantly; "as if he could be either of those! You might as well say he was Rehoboam!"

"Well, my dear, he might be worse," said Miss Lester. "I never knew a Rehoboam exactly myself, but there was a most estimable young man called Jehoram who lived up our lane, and that is much the same. But what does the 'R' stand for then?"

"The grandest of names," said Léonie; "three syllables. Can't you guess?"

"Roderick," experimented Miss Lester.

"No, Aunt; try again."

"Ralph . . Roger . . . Redgauntlet," Miss Lester again suggested.

"No, Aunt," said Léonie, "but you're getting warm, though; try once more. R, e, . . . g . . . there, I've told it you now."

"Regulus?" asked Miss Lester; "it cannot be that, surely?"

"No, you dear old stupid; Reginald, of course. Isn't it lovely?"

"Yes, my dear," said Miss Lester, "I think it is. Reginald Babb was our hair-dresser at home, and most civil and attentive he always was. And I am sure Mr. Mansel is the same," continued the speaker, observing that Léonie appeared somewhat disconcerted by the last remark; "it is most obliging of him to call here so frequently as he does, considering how little we have to offer him in the way of society. I hope you are always polite to him, my dear, when I am not in the room myself?"

"I endeavour to be," said Léonie demurely.

"Yes, I am sure you would," said her aunt. "But you know, my dear child, your tongue does sometimes run away with you; and although gentlemen may encourage a young woman of your frankness and high spirits to go on at the time, they are very apt to make remarks upon it afterwards. He is a sensible, well-informed person himself, besides his

having written so much, and he might not understand some of your strange speeches."

"You will make me hate him if you go on, Aunt," said Léonie, pouting. "I do not think he seems to mind very much."

"No, I daresay not: only be careful, my dear. As far as he is concerned, I am sure he always makes himself most agreeable. I only hope," added the speaker after a moment's reflection, "that he does not think it necessary to stop here talking to us as he does, merely out of good breeding. I have fancied more than once that he looked as if he would have liked to get away, but found it difficult to do so. His society is most pleasant to ourselves, but we ought not to be any tax upon him. Perhaps I might give him some hint about it."

"Perhaps you might, Aunt," said Léonie. "However, he says that next week he really must leave, and then, you know, we shall be no more trouble to him."

Something very much like a sigh escaped her as she said this; but such notice, if any, as it might have elicited from her companion was prevented by the entrance of the person who had been the subject of these remarks.

Reginald had come with a special object, but he had not the courage to announce it in the first instance. He waited for some opportune moment to bring it forward, and occupied himself meanwhile in general conversation. He was more of an adept in this now than he had been on his first visit to St. Clare!

Léonie, on her part, had laid aside her book on his entrance, and was busied with some knitting which necessitated the closest attention in itself, besides involving a position in which her face was a good deal turned away from their visitor. Occasionally, in the topics discussed between him and Miss Lester, Reginald would refer to Léonie for her opinion. Then she had to look up and deliver herself as advised on the occasion: although what she did thus say was greatly more reticent both as to quantity and quality than Léonie's usual utterances; a result which might or might not be attributed to Miss Lester's recent admonition.

Meanwhile Reginald was progressing in other useful lore, besides that of small-talk.

The day was exquisite, early in September; the view from the window, overlooking the small enclosed garden with the sea and varied coast-line beyond it, attractive in the highest degree. Having discoursed long enough to justify the character for agreeableness which Miss Lester had given him, Reginald felt called, as a heartier tribute of admiration to the landscape, to rise and walk forward to the window for a minute. When he returned, he seated himself in a chair considerably nearer to Leonie.

Not unobserved, of course; Léonie's devotion to her knitting became at once absorbing. As a counter-move, Reginald took up successively three photographs from the table in front of them, and asked questions about them, to which Léonie replied with the same sententious gravity as before. Then

his eye was caught by a written paper at which the knitter glanced from time to time.

"May I read this?" he said; "it looks like one of the advertisements in the second column of the Times. 'Then, you do 7 plain; only, you twist 'the wool 3 times round the needle, and so on to 'the end, twisting each time three times round, 'until you have 4.' Four what, please, Miss Brereton?"

"Oh! it is only my work," said Léonie, who was compelled to look up now; "a gentleman couldn't possibly understand it."

"No, I suppose not," said Reginald. "I know a country curate who sits indoors doing worsted work while his wife hoes the potatoes, but I don't think even he could master this. I don't see how you can ever get 'four' of anything by the process described; it would do for a question in the mathematical schools. Have you been painting this morning?"

"No, I have finished my last sketch," said Léonie; "or rather, I have not finished it; those aggravating people at the library have no cobalt. It must have been founded by King Canute, I think."

"They are fairly advanced, too," said Reginald, "at least in literature. I was looking over the list of books yesterday and was surprised to see the names of two quite modern works, which stood in the catalogue thus:

'Mill on Liberty.'

'Do. on the Floss.'

I had no idea they had got so far. However, pray let me sympathise with your misfortune; although . . .”

“Although what?” asked Léonie, who, although she had subsided into reticence again, could not forbear asking the question.

“Well, I was nearly presuming to say that I felt rather obliged to the cobalt, too. The fact is . . . May I ask first, though, Miss Brereton, whether your work is absolutely a matter of life or death? If the existence of any fellow-creature hangs upon the garment you are making, I will not go on.”

“No, it is only a child’s hood,” said Léonie, sedately.

“And the child will not sink into a premature grave if it should not be finished to-day?”

“Oh! no; it is for no one in particular.”

“Well, then, the fact is, Miss Lester,” said Reginald, addressing himself to head-quarters again, “that I have ventured, conditionally of course, to make a half-promise for you and Miss Brereton to-day. Will you both forgive me?”

“I have no doubt we shall,” said Miss Lester; “what are we to do?”

“To join two delightful old ladies in a drive to Lulworth; the Honourable Miss Rigauds. They are staying at the hotel, and this morning I heard them lamenting to the landlord their inability to get there. His whole stud was at their disposal, he assured them, but that would not do; they must have company; a waggonette with only the driver would be dismal; besides, they would meet with untold dis-

asters alone. I had already made some slight acquaintance with them, so I ventured to say that I would represent their hard case to you, and that I thought you might perhaps share the drive with them."

"Oh! Aunt, do come; how delightful!" was the exclamation which again rose to Léonie's lips. But, as on a former occasion, the words remained unuttered; there was a stronger force within her now which pent them back like a coffer-dam!

Miss Lester however approved of the plan on her own behalf. Even that unaspiring breast felt itself raised in the scale of being, placed, as it were, on a higher social and moral platform, by the suggested excursion with two ladies who wrote "Honourable" before their names.

"Of course you will go with us?" she added to Reginald in signifying her assent.

"The Miss Rigauds were kind enough to propose that I should do so," said Reginald; "but I shall not think of intruding, unless it is quite agreeable to you; and to Miss Brereton," he added, with a slight bow to Léonie. The latter said nothing. Miss Lester, who had become quite energetic on the occasion, replied,

"We shall certainly not go without you, Mr. Mansel; I can answer for my niece as well as myself. When are we to start?"

"At twelve," said Reginald; "if that will suit you."

"Oh! Aunt," exclaimed Léonie, suddenly dropping her work, "I quite forgot; oh! how dreadfully

unfortun . . I mean," she added in some confusion, "you must leave me out of the party, please."

"Why so, my dear?"

"Why I promised poor old Sproule I would go and see her this morning, and I do not like to disappoint her."

"Wouldn't to-morrow do?" asked Reginald.

"No, I am afraid not; I mean, I should not like that," said Léonie; who between her resolution that her protégée should not suffer, her intense longing to be where—well, where she could see and hear *him* all day, and her conviction, somewhere in some deep recess of thought, that it would be safer for herself to be left behind, was in a species of mental vortex which made her more inclined to cry than anything else.

"But perhaps there would be time before we start," said Reginald. "Do try. The carriage can take you up at the cottage, you know; I will walk with you there, if I may, and keep a look-out for it."

Reginald looked up as he spoke; and Léonie, who had not her work in hand to fall back upon, met his eye; with such a tell-tale light in her own, and such a consciousness within her of the tales it did tell, that after murmuring some broken form of assent she fled to her own room.

Her departure left Reginald in a tumult of feeling at least equal to her own. He had not had much practice in optical problems of the kind, but their solution comes pretty readily even to the least expert; and the suspicion, vague and remote as it

was, which flashed across him in this interchange of glances, set every pulse in his frame tingling. Was it possible; possible, that she did care for him?

No. The wild dream, envoy from the ivory gate of lies, dispersed in air almost in the same instant that it presented itself. Quite impossible; the most superficial reflection showed him that. Even had it been otherwise, the practical result would have been the same; one delicious memory would have accompanied him in his path through life, but his love must have been as rigidly sealed up from avowal as ever. Quite needless, however, to discuss this. Quite certain that the fancy by which he had been thus momentarily possessed was an entire fancy; a mockery and delusion!

At present indeed there was barely time to arrive even at this conclusion, as Léonie speedily reappeared in out-door costume. If the thing was to be done, it was; and she had expedited her toilette accordingly. Reginald charged himself with some carriage wraps; then they walked together to Sproule's cottage, which was at no great distance.

Little passed between them on the way, and nothing whatever during the visit at the cottage. Sproule was a hapless old woman whom they found shivering with cold over a few black ashes in her grate. The sight seemed to recall Léonie's entire faculties. She seized poker and tongs; raked together the embers into something like vitality, fanning and feeding the result with a cinder or charred stick here, and a piece of fresh coal there; then, when the fire justified its name, warmed some beef-

tea which she had brought with her; then went into the little back-yard for another shovelful of coal; then, before applying this, made some toast; and finally sate down and read out a story to the old lady. Reginald in the meantime mounted guard at the door, keeping a general look-out upon the road, but reserving his principal attention for the proceedings inside the cottage, of which in his position he commanded a full view. Once or twice there was a false alarm of the carriage, but Léonie would not hurry her ministrations. It would have been grievous to have foregone the day's happiness, or rather the solution of the mystery which she had a trembling half-sickening presentiment would be solved that day; but she would not have abated Mrs. Sproule's satisfactions by a hair's breadth.

Happily, there proved to be no occasion for her doing so. Just as the story was completed, and the listener, under the combined influences of the beef-tea, the fire, the narrative, and Léonie's example, had brightened into actual laughter, the waggonette appeared with their party. Léonie was handed in, and the carriage proceeded to its destination as rapidly as the Dorsetshire roads would permit.

CHAPTER XIII.

REGINALD was quite right in saying that the Misses Rigaud were charming. Both older than Miss Lester, but as enthusiastic as seventeen. As to Miss Kate Rigaud, the junior of the two, she was geniality itself; pointing out prospects and vistas, talking to the horses and the driver, speculating on the foot-passengers they met, and retailing anecdote and jest to her companions with unflagging energy.

Not so energetically, however, as not to have her eyes open upon the two younger members of the party. Miss Kate, who in five minutes had taken in more of the facts than Miss Lester would have done in as many years, very quickly satisfied herself as to what was, or ought to be, their mutual relation; and set herself to develop it with an alacrity which did her spinster soul boundless honour. "Some chance for them may turn up in the course of the day's proceedings," Miss Kate said to herself; "and if it does, it shall be no fault of mine if they miss it or have to forego it. That I'm quite resolved upon."

So they drove on.

Now dipping into one of the trough valleys of the district, and then climbing out of it again by an ascent like the roof of a French château. Now opening, from the down-land above, a peep of the

sea with its imposing cliff-line in the far distance. Now emerging unexpectedly on some picturesque village with its thatched cottages and square church-tower; or some farmstead in the nook of the hills where the red and yellow cider-apples were already ripening in basketfuls on the trees.

At length Lulworth itself was reached. Lunch claimed the first attention. Then, when this was dispatched, and ample justice done to the lobster, brown bread, and faultless butter, the cove which they had come to visit was visited, and justice done to that also. They had the place to themselves, and very lovely it looked; its circular basin set in a frame-work of heathery hills, while the water, plashing in softly to the white chalk beach, sparkled like a sea of chrysoprase.

Then Miss Kate, who by tacit consent had assumed the lead of the party, proposed an extension of their walk. "The driver had told her of a smaller cove, on the other side of the neck of land just above them, which was something to see." And the neck was climbed accordingly.

Pretty severe climbing, however, it proved to be: at any rate, their leader seemed to find it so. When they reached the top the object of their quest was partially visible, and Miss Kate professed herself quite contented with this result.

"It's no use old legs trying to be young ones," she said; "if we go down to the bottom of that place I for one shall never get up again, that's quite certain. Suppose we seniors stroll back to the inn, Miss Lester, and leave Mr. Mansel and your niece

to explore; they can tell us all about it, you know, which will do quite as well as seeing it ourselves. What do you say?"

Miss Lester was entirely agreeable to the plan, and no opposition was offered by the elder Miss Rigaud, or, unquestionably, by Reginald. Doubtless, as a matter of right and prudence, he ought not to go; but somehow right and prudence seemed to have lost their voices just then. Besides, it was for Léonie to decline, if anybody.

Well, Léonie did decline, after a fashion: pleaded heat, fatigue, and the like. But Miss Kate would not hear of it.

"Tut, tut, child," she interposed, "a short distance like that can't hurt you; think what girls had to walk in the Indian mutiny, with the thermometer at 200°. Why, at your time of life I should have been down the hill by this time. Off with you!"

So down the hill Léonie was driven, would she or would she not. The other three members of the party returned to the inn by a lane in which they were soon screened from sight.

Having yielded obedience in the first instance, Léonie now resigned herself to her fate unresistingly; a necessity seemed laid upon her, and where this dictated she must go. She was trembling a good deal, and at one or two points of the descent was really glad of the arm which Reginald offered her. At other times, they walked separately; not side by side, but he leading and she following.

So they came out upon the beach.

The bay they had now reached was of much

smaller size than the main cove; a mere indentation in the coast-line, with a semicircle of yellow sand extending between its two chalk cliffs at either end. They strolled down to the water's edge; then they followed the margin for a few yards, Léonie keeping still in the rear in the same submissive way, as if she were crossing a glacier and must place her feet exactly where he placed his. Two or three times Reginald stopped and turned round, with some futile attempt at conversation; the weather, the view, or the like. When he did so, Léonie stood still also, her eyes rivetted upon the sand, and making such reply as the remark necessitated. Then they moved on again.

Some minutes passed in this way. Then Reginald came to a full pause. He had made up his mind; he would not go on thus, tampering with plain duty; it was cowardly, wicked; let him return to the inn, forthwith.

Well, not forthwith: not this very instant. The afternoon was sultry; Léonie looked flushed and tired; undoubtedly she was so; what a brute he had been not to think of it! She must rest, of course. Only a little added suffering to himself. Not much more of that either; he would certainly leave Swanage that night, or the very first thing next morning.

Some rocks under the cliff were in shade. Reginald led the way to them, and Léonie, at his suggestion, seated herself on one. Still obeying as before; seeming to have no volition left of her own,

but to do everything in a trance, or like a person under mesmerism.

Reginald did not sit. He stood at some little distance from the rock. Looking up at the cliff from which it had broken off, first of all. Then looking out at the sea, rather more in Léonie's direction. Then looking at her.

He could do so unobserved: Léonie had her eyes bent fixedly on the sand, and was digging it up with her parasol; he might have taken a picture of her without detection. But, detected or not, he could not help himself; he must do it.

And must he not do something else? tell her this great secret of his heart? They would have parted for ever within twenty-four hours; might he not, must he not tell her this, first of all?

"No, no, no," something within him urged vehemently, or tried to do so. But the remonstrance would not be heard; he must speak; the words leapt from his lips. "I wish we had not come here," he said, speaking half to himself; "I am such a fool, so shameless! Things were bad enough before, and now they will be so far worse!"

As Léonie was not directly addressed she probably felt it unnecessary to reply to these utterances; at any rate, she remained silent. Reginald continued speaking; but not in soliloquy this time.

"Miss Brereton," he said, "there is something which I must confess to you: although you will hardly credit it, hardly believe that my presumption should carry me so far. It is, that I have dared, dared to love you. I could not help it. And I

could not help saying this to you now; but that does not much matter. I wish I could drown myself!"

Léonie still remained silent, and Reginald again went on; he gave her no time to reply, in fact.

"I have always felt this," he said, "ever since we met in the Gardens that afternoon. You have been in my heart all days since; all the day; you ever will be there; I could not give you up, if I would, but I will not! Meanwhile, Miss Brereton." Reginald added after a short pause, "I must say one thing in extenuation;—I am quite aware how hopeless my passion is. I knew it at the time; knew that in all likelihood we should never meet again, and that, even if we did, it was impossible you should ever love me; and I need not say that I know it still better now."

"But I do love you," said a very humble little voice from the figure seated in front of him; so humble, so tremulous in its pleading, that no one would have recognised it as belonging to the Léonie of old. In fact, the only thing still suggestive of that extinct being was the intense vehemence with which Léonie dug away at the sand as she spoke, and which the luckless implement employed in the process resented as much as a silk parasol could do.

But Léonie had to leave off her digging now. Another minute's pause, half of incredulity. Then, with a wild cry, "Léonie! Léonie!" her companion sprang forward and strained the fair, blushing, half

remonstrating, half sobbing girl to his breast, pressing upon her lips kiss after kiss of intense joy.

And then Léonie nestled in very close to the heart in which she had taken refuge, and listened as Reginald spoke on, his arm still round her; making no resistance, no plaint; letting him do with her as he would, in the confidence of her new-learned lore of love!

Spoke on?

Was it speech, or some murmured, half-formed, tremulous utterance, phonetic to one hearer, but inarticulate, even could it have been reproduced, to the whole world besides:—the broken symphonies of the sea-waves; the prophet-voices of spring in the rustling copse; the modulation of the organ-keys, as the master's hand pours out to them, as to a familiar, in the prelude of some expected strain, the secrets of a yearning beyond music!

Half-an-hour and more passed, and still Reginald sate in a tumult of emotion, lost alike to the lapse of time and to every fact excepting that of his present deep joy.

But then a sudden revulsion took place; the past, and still more the future claimed their share in his thoughts. Was this what he had contemplated? Because she loved, had he forgotten that he must not do so? Possibly never, even after the unexpected discovery of that afternoon; how was it probable, how would Sir Edgar, Léonie herself when she came to reflect, ever tolerate it where the social differences were so vast? But, at all events, never until that secret was unravelled, the mystery which

seemed to hang over himself, his birth, his family; until he knew that he had a name which, humble and struggling as his lot might be, he might at least ask her to share without degradation!

True, he had made one false step already; allowed this child-heart, in its guilelessness and trust, to pour out the wealth of its love before him, while he, the self-renouncing one as he should have been, sate by and calmly accepted the sacrifice. But this should not go on. He would do right, even thus tardily. The facts should be ascertained from Mrs. Mansel "before the week was a day older!"

As Reginald thus decided, he partly unwound his arm,—he could not bring himself to do so altogether,—and spoke in a different tone to the murmured colloquy which had been passing between them.

"Léonie, darling," he said, "I am afraid I have been very wrong. This has taken me so entirely by surprise that I have been unable to think of it hitherto; but I must do so now, in your interest. You must not throw yourself away upon a nameless adventurer."

"But you are not nameless," said Léonie, "at least, whenever you choose to give your name to the public. Think of the distinction you have won already! and I know that is nothing to what is coming."

"I am not so sanguine," answered Reginald, "Besides, even if I should succeed, it will make no difference. You ought not, with your beauty and

position, to marry a mere literateur, whoever he may be."

"I mean to marry this one," said Léonie, "at least, if he will let me: if he won't, I must go away and break my heart somewhere. It is a very little bit of a one, so I don't suppose it will be of much consequence."

Again Reginald drew the loving girl closer to him and pressed her lips passionately to his own. But he kept his purpose, notwithstanding.

"Even if I should permit this, darling," he said, "Sir Edgar will not, I fear. Of course, I shall communicate with him directly; that is to say, as soon as I have dispatched a still more urgent duty, which I fear will take me back to London this evening."

"This evening!" said Léonie, dolefully.

"Yes, Léonie dear, for your sake; for both our sakes; something which it is imperative I must see to, quite at once. I will not tell you what it is at present, but you will trust me, will you not, my own love; trust me that it is necessary?"

"I suppose I must," said Léonie. "But how long will it take?"

"I hope to be back to-morrow evening at latest," Reginald answered. He would not distress his companion by hinting at the resolution which he had formed in the event of Mrs. Mansel's disclosure being unfavourable; would not allow himself, in his present deep joy, to think that it could be so. The resolve was as fixed as ever, but he refused to believe that it could ever be necessary for him

to act upon it. All family secrets were not those of dishonour,—such dishonour as would compel him to give up Léonie! He flung the thought from him.

“Well, I suppose you must be spared,” said Léonie; “but only till to-morrow evening, mind; you promise that?”

“Promise,” said Reginald. “In the meantime, too, I intend, that is to say, I believe I shall have written to Sir Edgar, which is my second trouble. As I said, I fear he will never consent to our union.”

“Oh! yes, he will,” said Léonie. “He has no conventional ideas about marrying for position or anything of that kind, quite the contrary: then, too, he is so fond of my giddy-headed self. I have not been at home much lately; Papa has been in sad trouble and it has depressed and altered him a great deal, but he is as kind to me as ever. By the way, of course you know . . .”

“Mr. Mansel!” “Mr. Mansel!” “Miss Brereton!” “Miss Brereton!” shouted a good-tempered voice from the rising ground above, as Léonie said this. She sprang up from her seat in great confusion, leaving her sentence incomplete. Reginald did the same, and in less time than could be credited by those who have not undergone a similar transformation, the rapture of their late intercourse was exchanged for a decorous tête-à-tête; in which the gentleman and lady stood contemplating the view, with as little appearance of interest in each other

as if they had been two lay-figures in an artist's studio.

The dissimulation, however, transparent as it was, sufficiently answered its purpose; or rather need never have been employed. The voice, which was that of Miss Kate Rigaud, was expressly designed to give timely warning to those of whom she was in quest; and as Miss Kate continued to repeat her summons at short intervals, and carefully directed it towards a part of the beach on which she could see they were not standing, there was ample time to escape discovery. It appeared that the driver had suggested their return to Swanage before it got later, the roads being rough and no light to be had; so the horses were to be put to immediately, and Miss Kate had come for the absentees.

The inn was soon reached, and the journey home accomplished without misadventure; from the driver Reginald learnt en route that there was an evening up-train from Wareham which he could meet if he started immediately on reaching Swanage.

This was accordingly decided upon. A few hurried words and a fervent pressure of the hand were all which he had time to exchange with Léonie, as they parted at the gate of St. Clare House, Reginald accompanying the Misses Rigaud to the hotel.

A quarter of an hour later, the gig which he had ordered drove off along the Wareham road. Léonie stood and watched it from her window until

it disappeared in the rapidly-increasing darkness. Then, after a short evening, aunt and niece both retired to rest; Miss Lester, in fact, for whom the day's fatigue had been almost too much, appeared to be seriously indisposed, although she would not allow Léonie to sit up with her.

Léonie herself was tired, but it was long before she could compose herself to sleep. The agitating occurrences of the day occupied her mind for many hours. At one time she recalled Reginald's looks, his words, his passionate embrace; at another, thought of twenty things which she had been intending to say to him, but which must now be deferred until his return. One of the most prominent of these related to her brief engagement to Percy Delacombe.

"I ought to have told him about that," Léonie said to herself; "I don't know how I came to forget it, except, I suppose, from its being all so different now. I must tell him as soon as we meet to-morrow, poor boy; I hope he won't mind; I shan't let him drive me away from him if he does!"

"Dear me, no," continued Léonie, pursuing her recollections of the late scene, "and I never told him about Papa either; I mean, about his not being my real Papa; I was just beginning to, I remember, when that jolly old Miss Kate called us. Well, that is of no importance!"

CHAPTER XIV.

It was past eleven before Reginald reached the small but pleasant house in the outskirts of London which he had taken for Mrs. Mansel. He had telegraphed to say that he would return that evening, and she was sitting up and had supper ready on the table for him.

Reginald hastily swallowed something, more to collect his own thoughts, and avoid distressing his mother by too abrupt a mention of the subject on which he had come to speak, than because he actually needed it; thirst and hunger seemed incompatible conditions with the emotion under which he was labouring.

Then the cloth was removed, and Reginald at once began.

"Are you very tired, Mother; can you spare me a few minutes' talk?"

"Certainly, Reginald," said Mrs. Mansel; "you have been away more than a month now, and there is a great deal we have to talk over. There is the kitchen boiler has been burst ever since last Thursday, and no hot water to be had; then the drawing-room chintz is wearing so badly; and Susan says . . ."

"Well, never mind her now," said Reginald, irritated at this enumeration of domestic grievances,

under the heavier burden that was pressing on himself. But the feeling quickly passed.

"I will see to it all to-morrow, dear Mother," he added in the next moment, "but at present I have something of consequence to ask you about; I have come up from Swanage on purpose."

Mrs. Mansel looked at her son, and at once read in his face the confirmation of a fear which had suggested itself to her on receiving his telegraphic despatch, and which had in fact originated her statement of home troubles. They had a tendency to prevent its realisation; to defer it, at all events!

But there was no fencing it any longer now; something in her son's manner showed her that. In trembling anxiety she sat waiting the result, while Reginald proceeded.

"You recollect, Mother, a subject on which I spoke to you two or three years since; not long before Uncle Woodroffe's death?"

"I am not likely to forget it," said Mrs. Mansel. "But you also recollect, Reginald, what further passed between us then: you promised that as long as I lived you would not repeat the question you had asked me."

"The promise was conditional only," said Reginald; "it was to be at an end if any necessity arose for my knowing what I then sought to know."

"But what necessity can there be?" said Mrs. Mansel. "Your being called to the bar was the only one you mentioned, and that is all over now."

"There is a stronger need than that now," said Reginald; "one absolute and paramount; one in which the happiness of another is involved. I am engaged to be married."

Mrs. Mansel looked up in considerable surprise. "Indeed, Reginald!" she exclaimed; "to whom?"

Reginald reflected for a moment. "You have a right to know, Mother, and I hope will know; but not at present. It depends upon your reply this evening whether the engagement ever comes off at all; should it not be so, it will be better that even you should not be told her name. And now, let me repeat the question; that which I asked you on the occasion I speak of. Who, and what was my father?"

Mrs. Mansel moved uneasily in her seat. She saw that the communication could no longer be delayed, but she could not bring herself to make it. Not until the very last moment possible.

"Mother! Mother!" Reginald pleaded earnestly, "you would not keep me thus in suspense if you knew the torture it causes me. Who was he? I say, was," he continued, "because you spoke of him as not living; you said that you lost him many years since, before I was born even. How; when, Mother? And who was he? Why cannot I know?"

Mrs. Mansel still shrunk from giving the required answer; a few broken words only escaped her. "He is living, Reginald, as far as I know," she said. "I have not heard of him expressly, not heard the name mentioned even, since your uncle's death; but

I should probably have heard if he had ceased to exist."

"What did you mean, then?" Reginald persisted, still more earnestly than before, "by saying you had lost him? Why is there this mystery? Mother," he added after a pause, and speaking in a hoarse whisper, as he put the question which was so terrible to put to *her*; so terrible in its results to himself! The question which, if answered in the affirmative, would, he had long since settled, dash to the ground all his hopes! "Mother, was . . . was he not your husband? Am I illegitimate?"

Mrs. Mansel shook her head, and slightly touched the wedding-ring on her finger. Reginald sprang up from his seat in eager joy.

"Thank Heaven for that," he exclaimed; "thank Heaven! Pardon me for asking such a thing, Mother," he exclaimed, "but it has been the great dread which has weighed upon me for years past. Of course I had seen what you point to, but I feared there might be some mistake, something not right about it: your answer has lifted a heavy weight from me. But why, why then this concealment?" he continued. "If there is no cause for shame . . ."

"I did not say that, Reginald," Mrs. Mansel replied, while a dark spot glowed upon her cheek.

Reginald observed it, and felt the cup of joy which seemed to raise itself to his lips the moment before, again struck from him. Still, he could not but feel compassion for the person whose misery he was compelled thus to probe.

"Dear Mother," he continued, "whatever the

grief be to which you refer, let me share it! Even should it prove fatal to my own hopes, you shall never hear syllable or murmur of reproach from me; I will aid you to bear it, if I can; aid you with my deepest sympathy, if with nothing better. Might it not save you some pain," Reginald continued, as Mrs. Mansel still sat silent, and in fact seemed incapable of replying, "if you were to give me that paper to read?"

"Paper, Reginald?"

"Yes; you told me when we last spoke about this, that you had kept a written account of it all, in case of your death."

"That is not here," said Mrs. Mansel. "Your uncle always had charge of it, and his executors have it now."

"But you wrote it yourself?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Mansel.

"Mother, what was in it? Tell me, I conjure you, here on the spot, this night; I cannot sleep, cannot quit the room until I know! Tell me in any words," he added, "any that will be easiest to you, the shortest, the simplest; if it will be easier to you so, tell me as if you were speaking of some other person, not of yourself; I shall quite understand. But, in some form, Mother, I must, must hear it."

Mrs. Mansel was overborne by her son's vehemence, and could no longer refuse compliance. She rose, and moved to a chair at some distance, placing herself so that, where she sate, her face was averted from Reginald's view. He, on his part, ob-

served the arrangement, and scrupulously respected it. Mrs. Mansel then proceeded with her statement.

For reasons, which, if not already obvious to the reader, will speedily become so, it is only necessary here to give the latter in outline; adhering, in doing so, to the speaker's own words, but omitting such portions of her narrative as consisted mainly of details. Mrs. Mansel's manner, it may be added, was not without some natural dignity, although it expressed the deepest grief and contrition. She adopted her son's suggestion, and spoke of herself throughout in the third person, mentioning no names. Reginald occasionally asked for an explanation on some point, more to relieve the speaker's embarrassment than from any other reason: usually, he remained quite silent.

"It is a story of shame," she said; "of a wife's shame. Not one who erred to the last degree of culpability, thank God; that she was mercifully spared; even the accusation, the suspicion of it; but one who, short of this, was as grievously erring as it is possible for a wife to be. How far what occurred may have been the husband's fault in any way, it is needless to ask. Perhaps had he understood her better, felt more tenderness for one, who although her frivolity and many faults of character were little suited to the depth of his own, still loved him sincerely, it might not have happened. But that does not excuse her.

"Still less excuse is it, that the person by whose artifices she was led astray, although she now knows him to have been throughout a heartless villain, had

externally much to recommend him; was lively, well-informed, fascinating. If the wife found her home, as she did, frequently lonely and monotonous, the mother need not. And she, alas! was a mother. A child, a little girl, had been born before . . . before it all occurred; one whom she loved, oh! how fondly, but whom she has never seen since!"

As Mrs. Mansel said this, the tears forced themselves through the hands with which she was covering her face, averted as it was; and for a minute or two she wept bitterly. Then she proceeded.

"In an evil hour, this wife, this mother, listened to the suggestions of the person of whom I have spoken. He was a near connection of her own, a first cousin; one whom she had known all her life; who was in the habit of visiting her husband and herself at their house, and whose society, as I have intimated, often relieved the gloom of the latter. When alone with him, he constantly enlarged upon its gloom to her; painted to her the brightness which might be found elsewhere; made her more and more dependent upon him for interest and amusement; finally, in a moment of wretched weakness, persuaded her to elope with him.

"She did so," Mrs. Mansel went on, after again pausing, and in reply to a question which Reginald interposed with the view of assisting her in this portion of the narrative. "Left her home, whose only fault was that she was not worthy of it; left even her little girl, hardly more than a year old then; met her seducer, or the man who hoped to be such, at a town some miles distant.

"Fortunately, she did not go alone. A maid accompanied her to the place of meeting, and remained with her during the few hours she passed there; remained with her, and returned home with her."

"She did return home, then?" asked Reginald.

"The same evening," said Mrs. Mansel: "the attendant of whom I have spoken was the cause of her doing so. The cousin, who was a man of violent temper, required the immediate dismissal of the latter. This was refused, and an altercation followed; the girl, who by this time had become frightened at the step they had taken, urged her mistress's immediate return; and before night-fall this was done."

"How was she received?" asked Reginald.

"Spurned from the door," said Mrs. Mansel, "or from the hall rather. She crept to her husband's knees, assured him of her innocence, which in fact he did not affect to doubt; craved mercy from him. But he showed her none; drove her from him, an outcast and a fugitive."

"And she...?" Reginald again inquired, greatly moved.

"Never went near the house again," said Mrs. Mansel. "Never asked to be taken back, after that evening. She wrote once, requesting that she might be permitted the charge of her infant daughter; when no answer was received, she gave up this also. Her spirit, for she had spirit then, frivolous as she was, and selfish and poverty-stricken as she has since become, was roused by her husband's

treatment, and her only wish was to separate from him as widely as possible. She assumed her mother's maiden name, not her own, as this might have led to her being recognised; then, she removed to the neighbourhood of London, where her grief for the child she had been compelled to part with was compensated by the birth of another, a son. With him, she . . ."

"Do not proceed," said Reginald gently; "let me complete the sentence. With that son she has lived, not unhappily, although often in anxiety and need, for more than one-and-twenty years now; watching over his infancy, bearing with the petulance of his childhood, sympathising with every interest and wish of his up to the present hour;—the tender, affectionate mother! Repay her love fully he never can. But he may do something towards it; and there is one thing he can and will do. The husband, her husband, still lives, you say?"

"As far as I know, he does," answered Mrs. Mansel.

"He shall reinstate her," said Reginald; "take back to his heart and home the wife he has driven from them."

Mrs. Mansel shook her head. "That he never will do," she said.

"He shall," said Reginald; "I will hasten to him, denounce his injustice, his pride, his cruelty! And not for the mother's sake only;—for your sake, that is, poor suffering mother," he added, turning to Mrs. Mansel with a look of intense tenderness:

"I say, for your sake, for we understand each other now, do we not; there need be no more of these terrible secrets between us?"

Mrs. Mansel took her son's hand and pressed it fervently in both her own; then Reginald proceeded.

"There is another person now," he said, "to be considered; my own wife, that is to be; the darling girl who has given me her heart. I can hardly tell you how I dreaded this interview. Had the secret been what I at first surmised, I could not have claimed her love; I should have had nothing but a dishonoured name to offer her. But there is no dishonour in what you have now told me. Great sorrow, great tyranny, but nothing which cannot and shall not be put straight; nothing which will leave any barrier between us, excepting indeed her position, dear girl. And that I am too confident in myself to feel very insuperable."

"Her position, Reginald?" said Mrs. Mansel, repeating her son's words. Notwithstanding the profound agitation she had undergone, her curiosity was roused.

"Well, yes," said Reginald, "it is position to some extent. She is an only child; the daughter of a man of property, I am sorry to say."

"Really!" said Mrs. Mansel. "Where do they live?"

"In South Wales somewhere," said Reginald; "I don't exactly know where the place lies, although we have often spoken of it together. Somewhere upon the coast."

Since the conclusion of her own narrative, Mrs. Mansel had altered her position. She still sate on the chair where she had placed herself on commencing it, but without averting her face as she had then done: as her attention became engaged by what Reginald was saying she began to look at him again. But now she did so very fixedly.

"South coast?" she repeated. "Whereabouts?"

"A place I never heard of before," said Reginald. "Not a place, either; a peninsula, as they say in the geography books, only one doesn't often meet with them in fact. Gower, it is called; out by Swansea somewhere. Are you not well, mother?"

The look which Mrs. Mansel had fixed upon the speaker had now passed into one of the deepest emotion, although apparently connected less with Reginald himself than with something in her own thoughts. She replied hastily,

"Yes, quite well, thank you. You can understand that there has been a good deal to excite me this evening. But about this young lady: she lives in Gower, you say?"

"Yes," said Reginald; "her father is a baronet there."

"*A baronet!*" echoed Mrs. Mansel. She rose as she did so, and clutched the back of the chair on which she had been sitting with a convulsive gesture.

"Yes," said Reginald, who was now so much occupied with his subject that he failed to notice the movement; "you may well be surprised, but so

it is. Her father is Sir Edgar Brereton; of Ceniarth, I believe their place is called; and this is his only child, and a most dear girl too. She is older than I am, probably a year or more, but that makes no difference; the only real drawback, as I said, is her position, and Sir Edgar's property being . . . Good Heaven, what is the matter?" exclaimed Reginald, interrupting himself with a cry of sudden terror, as his eye was arrested by his mother's figure. She had quitted her hold of the chair and moved towards him, while he had been speaking. Now, she seemed incapable of further advance; standing motionless, like a person seized with catalepsy.

"Speak to me, speak, Mother," Reginald cried, almost in a shout, with a sickening feeling of apprehension as he did so.

But for several minutes his entreaties were useless. Mrs. Mansel neither spoke nor stirred.

At length her woman's heart came to her relief.

Sinking down upon a chair, nearer to Reginald than the one she had quitted, Mrs. Mansel again covered her face with her hands and sobbed bitterly. Then the words followed: "My poor boy; my poor boy!"

"Why, Mother? What?" exclaimed Reginald, in equal astonishment and dismay.

He had repeated this question more than once before Mrs. Mansel answered. Then she rose, and whispered something in his ear.

Four or five words only. But they produced an effect upon the person to whom they were addressed beyond what the most impassioned oratory could

have done. Freezing at first every vein in Reginald's body with absolute dismay. Then, in the next instant, causing him to start to his feet with a wild cry.

"Sister!" he exclaimed, grasping the speaker by the shoulder in the vehemence of his anguish; almost shaking her by it. "Sister! How dare you speak such a word to me? are you crazed; out of your senses?"

"Only too well in them, my poor Reginald," Mrs. Mansel answered. "My poor boy, you must bear to hear this, terrible as it is. May God help you to do so; may He forgive me; it has been all my wrongdoing. Reginald, I am Lady Brereton!"

"You? you?"

"Alas! yes, Reginald. The wife of Sir Edgar Brereton of Ceniarth. Caroline Le Bas, as I was when I married him; as I am called in the certificate which still lies in my desk upstairs: Caroline Brereton, as I am now. Your mother;—and, hers!"

It was about an hour later the same evening that Reginald returned to the sitting-room where this scene had taken place.

In the first stupefaction resulting from the discovery which he had now made, Reginald had thrown himself upon the nearest couch, and lay there, incapable alike of thought and action. At length he roused himself, and requesting his mother, in a few broken words, to wait for his coming down, went up-stairs to his own room. He now appeared

again with a small travelling portmanteau in his hand.

"What have you brought that down for, Reginald?" exclaimed Mrs. Mansel, or, as we must now call her, Lady Brereton; "where are you going to?"

"I don't know, Mother. Anywhere. Abroad somewhere, that is all I know."

"Abroad, Reginald?"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Reginald vehemently. "At once, this very night, if I can; if not, by daybreak to-morrow; any train, any packet that will take me out of England; I must go and ascertain at once."

"Out of England?" Lady Brereton again echoed.

"Yes, mother," said Reginald, coming closer to her, and speaking very low; "I must not stop here after the passionate love I have borne her; must not stop twelve hours even; I *dare* not. Rivers and mountains must lie between us henceforth, and for all time to come; or as long as my wretched life lasts. God bless and protect you, Mother," he continued, stooping to kiss her as he spoke; "every comfort shall be continued to you here, as at present; there will be no difference in that respect; it will be an incentive to me to work, to endure life for your sake even under this heavy grief, when otherwise I could hardly have borne to do so. There is one thing, by the way, you must promise me," Reginald added, as a sudden thought struck him.

"What is that, Reginald?"

"That you will never mention to any human being my . . . I mean," Reginald added, dashing away the passionate tears which sprang to his eyes, "what

I told you this evening; either that, or the fact of my being Sir Edgar Brereton's son. You promise me that, do you not, Mother? It is for her sake I ask it. It will be hard enough for her to bear in any case, but she must never know the fatal truth itself; never suspect it even; it would be intolerable. You promise me this, mother."

Lady Brereton promised what he wished, and Reginald quitted the room: at his request, she did not accompany him. A few minutes later, he had passed out into the darkness and silence of the deserted street.

CHAPTER XV.

SOME weeks have passed since the conversation between Lady Brereton and her son detailed in the last chapter.

They have passed wretchedly enough to Léonie. The bright life she had hitherto known, clouded only at the time by her grief for Alice, was now to be overshadowed by still heavier trials for herself.

On the afternoon of the day which followed the drive to Lulworth, Léonie seated herself in the drawing-room at St. Clare, awaiting Reginald's return from London.

It was still early; too early for her to be looking out for him with any reasonable prospect of his arrival; but she could not forego the happiness of doing so.

Léonie was alone on this occasion. Miss Lester still felt over-fatigued from the day before, and kept her room; at present, she wished to sleep, and Léonie, at her request, had left her accordingly. She had once or twice thought of mentioning to her aunt what had passed between herself and Reginald, but Miss Lester's indisposition had prevented this: besides, as Léonie recollected, he had not authorised her to do so. It would be best therefore on all accounts to defer it for the present.

So Léonie went downstairs, and had St. Clare all to herself.

She was very far from feeling lonely, however. She was not alone. She was not in the house; not in Swanage at all. She was in the little sandy cove at Lulworth; with that ineffable joy of earth, sea, and sky all round her; with Reginald's arm pressing her to his side; his voice murmuring to hers, his eye resting with hers on the same beauty, reading in hers so much which the voice left unspoken!

And now, within an hour or two, within three or four at the furthest, he would be with her again, his own self, his actual presence! It was a long time to wait for him, even that; but the waiting would be quite compensated when he did appear.

A step sounded on the gravel outside.

Reginald?

No, not his; she knew that too well to feel any doubt, the moment the garden-gate was thrown open. Besides, as she had already decided, it was far too early; not three o'clock yet.

Ah! three o'clock? the afternoon post, no doubt; could there be a letter from him?

She ran out upon the lawn to see.

It was the post.

One letter only, and that one from Reginald. Léonie knew the handwriting well enough by this time; many and many were the pieces of poetry which he had copied at her request. She trembled as she caught the letter from the bearer; could it be to say that he was not coming?

No, doubtless not. To fix the hour, most probably. She would quickly know; the precious missive must

not be opened until the man's back was turned, until she was quite alone in the drawing-room again; but then!

And then, Léonie, after pressing the envelope fervently to her lips, opened it; and read her woe.

On receiving Lady Brereton's communication Reginald's first thought, as soon as he could collect thought at all, had been of Léonie. He must write to her at once. Write something, whatever it might be; small choice of words, where everything that could be said was so intolerable! Before returning to his mother, Reginald accordingly sat down and penned a note, which he afterwards posted in time for the day mail to Swanage. It ran as follows:

"Léonie, a great trouble has come upon us; one which I have no means of breaking to you before you receive this letter; one which I do not know how either of us can ever bear. And yet, alas! it must be borne.

"Léonie, we must never meet again. This is the last time I must ever write your name, ever breathe it, ever think of you even. And you must do the same by me. You must shut me out from your thoughts for all time to come as if I were dead; more than dead, as if I had never existed. A great barrier has risen up between us! I dare not tell you what, it is too terrible after what has passed. But it is one which under no circumstances ever can be overleapt; the greatest, the most insuperable which can exist between two human beings, situated as we have been!

"It is only since we parted, those few hours since,

that I have discovered this. I never suspected it, the idea never crossed my brain before; how should it? I did fear something; feared that there might be some external obstacle, something in my own parentage or family, over and above the discrepancy in our position, which might separate us; it was the object of my hurried journey to town to ascertain this. But oh! Léonie; I never dreamt of what I have now learnt! Would that I had; would that I could have averted this suffering from you! it is for you that my heart bleeds while I write this, far more than for my own misery. And yet there is no help, no hope, now or ever hereafter: none.

“Try and trust me, if you can. That what has happened is wholly without blame on my part, that it is as grievous and unexpected to me as it is to you, I know you will believe. But try and trust me, beyond this, that it is best for you, that it is imperative for you, to do as I have said; to tear me from your heart and from your thoughts, instantly and for ever; try and do this; it is for your own sake that I urge it.

“And now, alas! I must not say more. I know how hatefully cold all this must read to you. That is the worst torment of it all, that I *must* write coldly; that with the passionate thoughts which still burn and throb within me, oh! how fiercely, there is, now, a still stronger force which compels me to do so. Compels my reason; not, I tremble to think, what it should do, my feeling, my—— I cannot write the real word; my pen shrinks from it! It is this which terrifies me so much. Had I listened to

the promptings of my heart, even with the fatal knowledge which I now possess, I should not have written in this deliberate way; I should have poured out line after line, removing all hope indeed, but clinging still to my wicked, my accursed passion, as it would have been. I have not done this; I have resisted, thrust it from me like a leprosy. Would that I could do more! Could quench in darkness these eyes which have looked so erringly; shut the inlet of these ears which have heard what they should not have done; stifle the voice that has caused you, caused both of us, this dark grief; rend asunder this heart which in its madness and wretchedness still beats so passionately! But the one thing I can do, I will; quit this country, as I shall have done within a few hours, finally and for all time. Léonie, Léonie, farewell! Upon us two has fallen a calamity beyond the ordinary measure of human suffering!

“REGINALD MANSEL.”

Such was the letter which Léonie, alone in the St. Clare drawing-room, with the lawn still bright in sunshine before her, with the hum of pleasant voices, the ripple of the distant waves, still sounding joyously in her ear, read and re-read.

How miserably!

Mistrust him; mistrust Reginald? No, indeed, that she would not do; far from it! If he could only look in upon her, only read her heart, he should see that, in the very anguish of her first grief she was obeying him; whom else should she obey? was

extinguishing, as he had bade her, or trying to extinguish, every memory of the past; every thought and incident connected with him; everything but him. He had claimed this surrender from her, and it should be made. Even if he should never know how faithfully made, and at what cost. Even while she could not, by any perusal of his letter, any divination, any guess, however wild, however improbable, assign any reason for what he had written!

For one moment a terrible fear darted across Léonie's heart. Could the writer be labouring under delusion, any excitement; could the mind, even in the few hours she had parted from him, have become disturbed in any way?

Up to the moment of their parting, it would have seemed to her a heresy even to have entertained the question; as great a heresy, almost, as it would have been to adopt that other alternative suggested in the letter, to have imputed any personal blame to the writer. But could anything have occurred in the interval which would prevent his being master of himself, explain this strange, almost incoherent document?

No, once more, nothing. Léonie read it again carefully, almost calmly, with this view; light-hearted as the girl was, she had strong sense, and often brought it to bear when wiser heads were at fault. And now, even in her own bitter grief, she did the same; perused the sheets, sentence by sentence, and word by word. But the result quite satisfied her. Nothing for a moment to justify her suspicion. Not-

withstanding the abruptness of their language, there was purpose, method, consistency throughout.

And why should she speculate thus?

It was all darkness, all perplexity, no doubt; these in the present; in the future, untold suffering. Not as yet realised in its fulness; but yet showing in the deadly chill which it shot through her heart,—much as some terrible disorder might do on its first approach,—what was in store for her. It was all these; more than these; but why discuss them, try to explain, to throw them off? Why not simply bear them?

Bear them, for his sake; trusting his truth; doing, as far as might be, what he bade her; mourning for his sorrow; living, if it might not be with him, as far as possible in and for him!

One practical decision in regard to her own conduct Léonie easily arrived at. She would not speak of this brief engagement, terminated as it had been within twenty-four hours from its commencement, either to Sir Edgar or Miss Lester. Reginald had not sanctioned her doing so; and if, alas! everything was at an end, what necessity was there for it; what advantage in any way?

So the poor, wounded heart kept its own counsel; stricken almost to the death, but yet striving to bear unrepiningly its woman's lot in loving and suffering.

And even the causes of suffering for Léonie were not exhausted as yet.

An unexpected sorrow came first; Miss Lester's death. The indisposition of the latter continued to

increase, and, about a fortnight after Reginald's letter, became so serious that she hastened back to London with Léonie, performing the journey with difficulty. No improvement took place there; and, some three weeks later, she gradually sunk, compelling Léonie, who had now no home elsewhere, to return to Ceniarth.

For some portion of this journey she was escorted by Stephen Ponsonby. Miss Lester, who felt her end approaching, and was unacquainted with any other professional adviser, had sent for the latter shortly before her death, and requested him, in the absence of any member of her own family, to make the arrangements which would be necessary. Stephen undertook the charge, and executed it with a consideration for Léonie's feelings which increased the favourable opinion she was disposed to form of him. When he proffered his escort as far as Gloucester, where he stated he had business of his own, Léonie gratefully accepted it. His manner on the journey was that of the most respectful sympathy, and Léonie thanked him cordially at parting; much to Stephen's satisfaction, as well as to the revival in some degree of the hopes which, a few months before, he had been on the point of abandoning.

At Ceniarth some week or two passed without incident. The place itself was sadly changed to Léonie. Strangers would never have felt much brightness there; but Léonie in former years had herself made this. While, for herself, there was then always Alice, ready to share with her joy and grief alike; Alice, to whom she might have confided

the heavy trouble which now crushed her, and who would have repaid the confidence with the warmest and truest sympathy.

But there was no Alice now. There was not even Hatty Delacombe; as we have said, she had quitted Trecoed on a lengthened visit soon after her conversation with Sir Edgar. There was nobody: no one from whom Léonie could reap comfort. There was Mrs. Ponsonby, from whom nothing whatever was to be reaped. And there was Sir Edgar, who, although he showed Léonie the same kindness as ever, had little capacity for a comforter either.

And yet, it was Sir Edgar who, in fact, enabled Léonie to support a burden of grief under which she might otherwise have sunk.

He did not give her consolation. He did not even know of her grief; as we have said, she shrunk from telling him. But he did give her something which was practically equivalent: which prevented her thoughts from dwelling incessantly on the one topic they would otherwise have been engrossed with. He gave her interest; interest in himself.

A very marked change had taken place in Sir Edgar since Léonie last saw him. He passed the same secluded life as ever; rarely appearing unless at meals, and not always then; shutting himself up in his library, or quitting it only for the lonely, purposeless roving described in a former chapter. All this had gone on since the catastrophe to Alice; Léonie was prepared for it.

But she was not prepared for something further which she now observed in him.

Two things rather.

! One was a strange look of trouble and anxiety about him; an apprehension which seemed perpetually to haunt him, and for which she could assign no cause. He looked ill, independently of this; very ill; but this was a separate matter; mental ailment, not bodily. And, collaterally with this, and as it were springing from it, came the second noticeable change. Sir Edgar had become unwontedly humble. Humble in manner, at all events, if not in other respects; a softened, subdued manner, wholly foreign to his previous character. The softening showed itself in twenty ways; in speech, above all; what he said, and the way he said it. Of old, Sir Edgar's utterances had been habitually caustic, like those of a person chafing always under some imagined injury. Now, they were as if the speaker had himself inflicted wrong; heavy, irreparable wrong, under the consciousness of which he was too bowed for any form of self-assertion.

"Could this be connected with Alice?" Léonie often thought. "Now that the tie between the two was severed for ever, now that Alice was gone from him, did Sir Edgar experience some remorse for his neglect of her during so many past years? Did he realise in any degree the priceless treasure he had thrown away in rejecting his child's love?"

Léonie eagerly grasped at the idea. To feel that Alice was reinstated in her father's affection, even when it was too late for their mutual happi-

ness, filled her with joy whenever she reflected upon it: gave a diversion to her thoughts which prevented her brooding on her own causes of sorrow. Still, this did not explain that other phase in Sir Edgar; his anxiety in regard to some matter of which Léonie knew and could divine nothing. And this disquietude, whatever it was, was evidently growing upon him; became more observable every day. What could it be?

Léonie was perplexed. None the less so, because she fancied, at times, that Sir Edgar seemed to connect these uneasy feelings with herself; if not as the cause, which it was palpable she could not be, yet as possessing in some way the power of allaying or removing them. Once or twice he had seemed on the point of applying to her for this purpose; asking some question, or making her the depositary of some confidence in regard to the matter which thus troubled him; then, apparently, his resolution failed him, and he desisted. Altogether, the matter seemed involved in some mystery.

Meanwhile, there was another person who had been even more observant of Sir Edgar's behaviour—Mrs. Ponsonby.

No mystery to her this anxiety in her brother-in-law; she knew well enough what it meant. Knew that, in secret, his whole soul was tortured with that one terrible apprehension; the fear to which his conversation with Hatty Delacombe had given birth, which he had communicated to herself, Mrs. Ponsonby, when he summoned her into his library immediately afterwards;—"Could there have been any

mistake in regard to Alice!" Knew this; and knowing also what it meant to herself, had been watchfully observant of him ever since that interview.

But now, since Léonie's return, how much more watchfully!

Mrs. Ponsonby saw in an instant, what only forced itself upon Léonie's notice after several days, that Sir Edgar's mind was in some way connecting her with its one subject; speculating, probably, on the relations between her and Percy Delacombe, past and present, the inference as to Alice's real conduct which they suggested, the knowledge in regard to him which she might have obtained by means of them. Saw that he would, in all likelihood, question her about this; might do so any day, any hour!

Mrs. Ponsonby trembled; she had never thought of this risk! Léonie might be as dangerous as Percy!

How the engagement between them had been in fact broken off; how much, or how little, the girl knew, Mrs. Ponsonby had no idea. But, but, she might have been told; no shutting out that possibility. And, if told, what was to prevent her repeating everything to Sir Edgar? Here had Mrs. Ponsonby been on the watch for a distant evil, when there was a home one close at hand; lying at her very threshold!

What could be done?

Clearly nothing as against Léonie. The idea did cross Mrs. Ponsonby's mind, but was at once discarded: it would be difficult, hazardous in the highest degree: besides, it would be wholly useless. Abundant evidence available without hers!

No, as before, she must go to the fountain-head: Sir Edgar himself. She need do nothing at present; merely watch. Watch: and then, if and when occasion arose—act.

It was not long before Mrs. Ponsonby's action was called into full play.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN October day; Sunday.

Afternoon church is "out" at Trecoed, as the phrase goes; the service completed about a quarter of an hour since, and the congregation dispersed. Mr. Delacombe remained behind the others, but has now quitted the building. Then the door and porch-gate were locked, and the keys carried back to the clerk's house.

Léonie had been at the service; sitting, as her wont was, with the school-children. On her return to Ceniarth, she had fallen back, as far as the mechanical performance went, but with a dull misery at her heart which made it only mechanical, into her old usages there; and this was one of them.

When the children were duly shepherded through the churchyard and out into the road, Léonie's task was over, and she started on her walk home. The sun was dipping; streaks of gold and crimson shot through the cloud-edging of the horizon, while the copses which overhung the village repeated the same colours, although less transiently, in their autumn foliage.

Léonie's eye took in the beauty which surrounded her; but wearily enough; its brightness was gone. It was added pain, in fact; every image, every tint recalled Reginald, some look of his, some word, some

happy hour they had shared together. Vain to endeavour to do his bidding, to try and forget him, when he was thus everywhere! How could she bear this cruel, cruel burden any longer? all alone too, all un comforted! Oh! if Alice were only there!

Léonie had preserved one memorial of Alice which she wore constantly; a small gold locket suspended by a chain round her neck; Alice had given her this, and it contained a portion of her hair. As Léonie's thoughts took the direction they had now done she instinctively raised her hand to feel this; it was a habit into which she had grown.

But the locket was not there; the clasp had become unfastened, and only the chain now hung at her throat. Where could she have lost it?

At church, doubtless. She distinctly recollected feeling it before the service began, and it could hardly have dropped without her notice since she left the building. Let her return and look for it at once.

Léonie obtained the keys, and soon found herself at the church, which stood on a rising ground at some little distance from the village: out of sight of any houses. The clerk proffered his services, but Léonie assured him she could manage the lock. And so she did: there was no difficulty; the heavy bolt shot back immediately, and Léonie entered. She returned to close the door behind her, as the air blew in keenly; then she commenced her search.

Apparently, with no prospect of success.

The locket was certainly not in the seat she had occupied, or anywhere in its neighbourhood: Léonie

looked in every direction, but without result. She feared it might have been picked up; perhaps stolen, or, more likely, detained until the owner could be ascertained.

As Léonie reluctantly arrived at this conclusion, and had just decided, as a corollary to it, that it was hopeless for her to continue her quest, she was startled by a sound proceeding from a different part of the building; a footstep, evidently that of a man. She looked up, and to her extreme surprise, saw Sir Edgar.

He, on his part, seemed greatly confused. "I fear that I have given you some needless trouble," he said, coming up to where she stood; "you have been looking for something, and I am afraid it is this; I have seen you wearing it." Sir Edgar produced the missing locket as he spoke.

"Oh! thank you, Papa," said Léonie eagerly; "I am so glad; I would not have lost it on any account; it is dearest Al . . . I mean," added Léonie, breaking off her intended sentence, and then again pausing.

A deep shadow of some kind passed over Sir Edgar's face as Léonie spoke, but he made no reference to what she had said. He merely added some words of explanation as to his own presence in the building.

"I come in here occasionally," he said, with an unusual hesitation in his manner; "I have a key, you know, from the outside into the chapel where the family monuments are; it is our private property. Your ornament was on the floor here, and I was just leaving the church with it, but waited until I saw

who had come in; the people here are so boorishly curious."

"I am very much obliged to you for finding the locket, Papa, at all events. Shall I take it?"

Léonie stretched out her hand as she spoke, but Sir Edgar still detained the trinket in his own. He was looking at it; looking at the hair inside, which was set so as to be visible without opening the clasp. A glossy, silken tress: dark, but attracting the eye, even in the narrow space in which it was confined, by its softness of colour and texture.

Sir Edgar showed much agitation as his eye rested upon this: some feeling stirred within him which was incapable of repression. "It was beautiful hair," he murmured. "She often looked beautiful herself, or nearly so. Strange that so fair an exterior should have harboured a nature so little in harmony with it!"

"Papa!" exclaimed Léonie, almost recoiling from the speaker in her surprise and dismay, "what do you mean? what can you mean? 'Harboured!' She! Alice! She who was all truth, all goodness!"

"I would think as you do if I could, Léonie," said Sir Edgar gently. He had spoken quite gently throughout, his new phase of character showing itself more markedly than Léonie had yet seen it. "Perhaps," he added in a very low tone, "I do think so; or should, if I dared. But I do not dare."

"Not dare, Papa?" Léonie again asked, in the utmost bewilderment.

Sir Edgar made no direct reply. He did not speak at all for a minute or two, but seated himself on one of the oaken benches near them and leant

his head gloomily on one hand. Then he asked abruptly, pointing to the lectern in front of them on which lay a copy of the Bible,

"Do you read that book?"

"Surely yes, Papa."

"Do you believe it?"

"Oh! Papa, yes," said Léonie eagerly; "I should be miserable if I did not."

"Do you believe what it says about . . . about people repenting; being forgiven? Can they be?"

"They can and are," said Léonie; "all must be."

"Whatever they may have been? whatever they may have done?"

"Do not doubt it, dear Papa," said Léonie: "I am very erring, very unfit to talk about such things, but do not doubt that."

"Delacombe was urging that in his sermon this afternoon," said Sir Edgar, speaking half to himself.

"This afternoon?" asked Léonie, in great surprise. "Were you in church; at the service?"

"Yes. I have been there once or twice lately; nobody knows of it. I let myself into the chapel, and sit there; it is quite out of view. But no, it is no use; it *cannot* be. If I have been deceived, if there has been any mistake, I have sinned too horribly; beyond mercy, beyond redemption, beyond omnipotence! Léonie!" he exclaimed, turning round suddenly where he sate, and confronting her.

"Yes, Papa?"

"If I ask you a question, you will answer me, as far as your knowledge goes, truly and faithfully, as

you have hope here and hereafter? You will do this?"

"I will, Papa," said Léonie solemnly; "from the very depth of my soul."

"Then tell me this," said Sir Edgar. "You spoke just now of her, of Alice's truth and goodness. Do you know nothing to the contrary?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Léonie.

"And yet you of all persons should," said Sir Edgar; "you who were the chief sufferer by it. Do you recollect that . . . that evening; the evening she was missing?"

"I am not likely to forget it, Papa."

"And do you know that something had happened at an earlier hour that day? That she and Percy Delacombe had met; met at the ruins of the castle; had a long conversation together in private?"

Léonie hesitated for a moment. She was greatly surprised at Sir Edgar being acquainted with a fact of which, with the exception of the surviving actor in the scene, she believed herself and Hatty Delacombe to be the sole depositaries. Then, too, there was another thing; Sir Edgar evidently connected some unfavourable impression in regard to Alice with the circumstance referred to.

How was this; what did it mean? what should be her own line of conduct?

Had the occasion arrived which she had spoken of to Hatty as possible, but with very little idea of the form it would in fact assume? Was she at liberty, in Alice's vindication, to disclose what actually took place? She had obtained from Percy

a general permission to do so, but at the time her thoughts had rather pointed to Percy's own justification than that of Alice. Might she now use the permission for the latter? Would Alice herself, if capable of deciding, sanction her doing so?

All this passed rapidly through Léonie's mind, and, as we have said, she hesitated for a moment before replying to Sir Edgar's question. At length she said, in a low tone,

"Yes, Papa, I do know this."

"And you know," Sir Edgar asked again, "what passed between them, between her and young Delacombe, at that meeting?"

"Every syllable, Papa, from first to last."

Sir Edgar became still more agitated than before; a perceptible shudder passed through his frame. Something in Léonie's manner now, concurring with the language she had used in regard to Alice a few minutes before, showed him that he was on the verge of a fatal discovery. Might he not stop here; forbear to ask the final question?

No; he could not. He must hear it out now. He still, indeed, resisted in some sort; his next question was put almost in his old manner, the defiant, sarcastic manner which had once been habitual to him. He would thrust the terrible end away from him as long as he might; try to mould the answer to his own need! But he must have the answer.

"You surprise me, I confess, Léonie," he said; "I should have thought that female instincts were a sufficient guarantee against the sagacious estimate

of character you have just expressed. However, I was not speaking of their conversation together; this may or may not have been compatible with truth and goodness, as you phrase it. I do not in fact know, although it is pretty obvious to guess, what it was myself. What I intended to ask about was something else. Did nothing pass between them besides conversation?"

Léonie had forgotten for the moment the circumstance to which Sir Edgar's question pointed.

"No, Papa," she answered; "nothing that I am aware of."

"You are not aware then," he asked in the same sneering tone, "that this model young lady, this paragon of virtues, was, so to speak, lying in her admirer's arms for some half-hour together; that he was stooping over her, kissing and embracing her and so on; being engaged to yourself all the time, as I need not remind you? You were not acquainted with this little episode, it seems?"

Mockingly as Sir Edgar spoke, his very soul was trembling within him for Léonie's reply.

It came speedily enough. As the recollection of what had really taken place flashed upon her, every hesitation, every scruple was swept out of her mind; the words burst from her.

"Papa! Papa!" she exclaimed, "this is horrible! Who can . . . how could you believe that? Papa! she was in a swoon all that time; fainting; I was the wretched, although most innocent cause of it; of all her misery; of her death, I fear, in some way. They always loved each other, she and Percy. I

never knew this or dreamt of it, until quite the last; but she knew of Percy's love, and, oh! Papa; she refused him; drove him from her; bore, oh! what must she have borne, for my sake; that I might be happy! Dear Alice! dear Alice! It was quite absolute accident that they met that day. Somehow they did meet. He found out, as such things do get found out when one's heart is breaking with them, that she really cared for him all the time; he urged his suit, but she would not listen to it, would not remain with him, quitted him almost angrily. And then that happened; what you spoke of, I mean. She was lying insensible the whole time, he trying to recover her; kissing her in his despair, poor fellow, I have no doubt, often and passionately enough, when he thought there was no hope! Oh! Papa, how could you think anything different of Alice; how could you speak of her as you did? Some evil spirit must have possessed you!"

The speaker stopped, exhausted by her own grief and vehemence.

But Sir Edgar made no reply. His head was not supported on one hand now, as it had been; it had dropped forward on the rail of the oak-bench in front of him. He remained there perfectly motionless; apparently unconscious.

Léonie became frightened: she spoke to him; laid her hand on his shoulder, imploring him to look up.

At length he did so. He was deadly pale, but calm; some resolution seemed to have been forming

itself in his mind which had externally tranquillised him.

"Evil spirit!" he half muttered; "aye, more than one; the one within, the worst of the two, whatever the other's motive may have been. Child, come here!"

"I am here, Papa," said Léonie, who was not without some apprehension that her benefactor's mind was disordered by what had just passed; "close beside you here. Are you not well, Papa?"

"What is to-morrow?" he asked abruptly, without noticing her reply.

"To-morrow, Papa? Monday," answered Léonie.

"No, not that; the day of the month."

"The seventeenth: to-day is the sixteenth."

"The seventeenth! our magistrates' board-day; yes, that will do," Sir Edgar again muttered to himself; "the more public, the more crushing my infamy, the better. Leave me now, child!"

Léonie remonstrated, but to no purpose; Sir Edgar repeated his order, and she was compelled at length to comply with it.

"You will come home soon, Papa?" she asked, turning round as she quitted the building.

"By-and-bye; by-and-bye," was his only answer.

Then Léonie locked the door, and left him as he wished.

Dusk shadows in the church, growing more dusk and uncertain every minute. Confusing the objects on which the eye rested, both as to shape and distance. Precluding, at last, as the evening advanced, all identification of objects, as such; blotting out arch and moulding, pulpit and choristers'

desks; draping the building in a pall of darkness; here and there only, a surface of less opaqueness which indicated the position of one of the clerestory or aisle windows.

Still, through the darkness, Sir Edgar sate on where Léonie had left him. His head had again dropped forward on the bench from which he had raised it to speak to her. He never lifted it now, made no movement of any kind; simply sate on, purposing nothing, hardly conscious of even thought now;—stunned!

The only sign of life which would have been perceptible in him was his breathing. In the intense stillness this was distinctly audible; a stillness hardly broken by the regular beat of the church clock, the pendulum of which swung in the open space beneath the tower, or by the occasional call of some bird in the copses outside.

The hour had twice sounded from the belfry above, striking seven and eight successively, but Sir Edgar's position remained unaltered.

Soon after eight, however, a change took place in the interior of the building itself. The dull opal-grey of a window near the east end suddenly became transparent, and a ray of light streamed obliquely through it; bringing out the tracery into strong relief, and penetrating to the wall opposite, which it transformed into a substance like that of the purest marble.

Sir Edgar did not observe this; or, if he saw it, did not look up. As he sat there with his face still buried, it seemed as if the bright ray which had so

suddenly shot into the building were looking down at him. Presently, however, as the moon, of which this had been the precursor, advanced further round the church, two or three other windows were lighted up, pouring in a flood of clear radiance upon the darkness. Then Sir Edgar at length raised his head, and sat watching it. He did not move otherwise; only sat, as before, quite still; and watched.

Another change presently followed, and Sir Edgar watched that too. The moon had travelled still further round, as well as risen higher, and now stood immediately above the east window, the stained glass of which glittered and sparkled in the light, throwing from its panes a thousand rich hues on the chancel seats and tessellated floor below. In the centre compartment was that figure, august, imperial in its self-sacrifice, adored in earth and heaven; all-potential as God, all-compassionating, all-expiating as man! It was not lighted up at first. But presently, this too shone out; the lifted Cross, the divine Victim:—beneath, while the soldier's spear pierced, the Mother of sorrow standing entranced in grief!

A sudden impulse drew Sir Edgar towards the spot; he could not resist it. He moved slowly forward. Entered the chancel. Ascended the two or three steps to the altar-rail. Paused on the uppermost. Knelt.

Knelt for the first time for many years; perhaps since childhood.

He did not pray; he had no words of prayer, no supplication, consciously to himself, to make. He

simply knelt, as he had sat before, all those hours of darkness.

But not with bent head now, if with abasement of heart and soul. Gazing upward; if with eyes whose strained and bloodshot orbs were dimmed with tears. Not, perhaps, failing of acceptance, if to be weary and heavy-laden be the passport to it at that mercy-seat!

CHAPTER XVII.

It was about an hour later that Mrs. Ponsonby returned to Ceniarth in the carriage, from the Swansea chapel she had been attending. As she crossed the hall she met Sir Edgar, who was on the way to his library; he had entered the house a few minutes before.

Mrs. Ponsonby was at once struck by his manner and look, the agitation exhibited by both of which was extreme. A deadly chill smote to her heart. Had anything transpired; what had he been doing; where had he been; where was Léonie? Let her learn; know the worst at once!

She followed Sir Edgar into the room; shut the door behind them both; questioned him. "Was he unwell? Was anything the matter? What had happened?"

At first Sir Edgar seemed unconscious of what she was saying; apparently, he hardly realised that she was present; that any one was. When he at length did so, he addressed Mrs. Ponsonby in a tone almost of horror. Hitherto, he had thought only of his own part in the fatal tragedy of his house; now, the sight of her recalled hers also. "You! you here, woman?" he exclaimed. "You, of all people?"

Mrs. Ponsonby's cheek blanched with fear; her tongue seemed palsied. After a while, she did

stammer out some broken utterances; explanation, enquiry, or what not. But Sir Edgar took no notice of them. He had turned away from her again, and was pacing up and down the room, evidently endeavouring to repress some strong emotion; from time to time a word or two escaped him: "Vile, vile treachery; vile, hateful slanderer!"

At length he seemed to regain the mastery over himself. He stopped, and returning to where Mrs. Ponsonby was standing, spoke to her in a low voice, the more startling from its contrast to his previous vehemence.

"I know all," he said; "everything from first to last. What your motive has been, I do not know, I cannot guess; but that is of small importance; there is the fact. You intended to make me your tool, your dupe;—and you succeeded. That is all which need pass between us. Leave me now, if you please."

Mrs. Ponsonby dared not disobey: on the contrary, she was only too glad to escape. He had not lifted his hand against her, there on the spot, as he might have done; had given her time, warning, opportunity: let her make use of them! She fled precipitately!

Fled in the first instance to her own room; flung herself on the nearest chair there, and sat considering.

It had come then, at last, the long-dreaded discovery; this she had from Sir Edgar's own lips! And how frightful had been the enforced calmness with which he apprised her of the fact! more terrify-

ing than even his violence would have been, more suggestive of the peril that was in store for her. Would he spare her because he had spoken in those measured tones?

No indeed; they meant only added forethought, added certainty! In its paroxysm of fear, a hundred images of death rose before the disturbed brain; better that he should have lifted his hand, should have slain her where they stood, than have this hanging over her!

Better, if she could not avert it. But she could do so, and would. Would do it at once.

Stealing warily, noiselessly down the stairs; along the corridor at their feet; hardly drawing breath in her progress. Stealing to the dressing-room, Sir Edgar's dressing-room. Ascertaining, for the moon was still above the horizon, that he was not in the adjoining bedroom; doubtless in his library still, but at all events, not there. Moving forward, stealthily as ever, to the shelf where *it* stood, the labelled packet; the fetish which she had consecrated, said prayers to; ah! there was no time for that now! Abstracting a portion of the contents; no great quantity;—a little of it went a long way, that white powder which glittered so harmlessly to the eye as the stream of radiance from without fell upon it! Replacing the packet. Regaining her own room; unobserved, unsuspected, by human sight or thought.

Yes. But there was something Mrs. Ponsonby had not thought of yet. Intent on the means of protecting herself against Sir Edgar, she had not

reflected that a further precaution would be necessary. Should he . . . should the means succeed, there would, of course, be investigation, enquiry: how was this to be met?

True, in a general way, Mrs. Ponsonby was provided for this. Whatever happened, she had more than once reasoned, there would be nothing to connect herself with it, no motive, no suggestion of any: the agent employed was in Sir Edgar's own custody; and the act, barring any motive existing elsewhere, would be taken for granted to be his own. True. But what now occurred to her for the first time was that this link possibly might be supplied. If Sir Edgar knew everything, as he clearly did, where had he acquired his knowledge?

As clearly, from Léonie. And, having done so, might he not in turn have made the latter acquainted with the part Mrs. Ponsonby had herself played in the matter?

Motive enough there, palpably; enough to set enquiry on the right track, and discovery too! She must see Léonie: ascertain how this was, before doing anything. Plenty of time for this; Mrs. Ponsonby had already, long since, sketched out the mode in which the thing was to be done. A very obvious, very easy one; plenty of time, the best part of an hour, before she would be called upon to put it in practice. Let her see Léonie.

The latter had of course returned from the village long since, and had dined by herself, Sir Edgar and Mrs. Ponsonby both being absent. She was now in the drawing-room, at the piano; Mrs.

Ponsonby had heard the music of a Messe solennelle by Rossini which Léonie was fond of playing, for some time past; the whole time she had been engaged in her own preparations, in fact. Heard, that is, that there was music, and knew it as something which Léonie played; as to any more specific idea of it at present it might have been mazurkas.

Mrs. Ponsonby was trembling so much that she could hardly turn the handle of the drawing-room door. When she at length did so, however, Léonie's face, as she looked up from her instrument, entirely reassured her. It showed the traces of extreme agitation; thus confirming, had it required confirmation, Mrs. Ponsonby's belief as to the source from which Sir Edgar had derived his information. But there was nothing in it which had special significance as regarded Mrs. Ponsonby herself. And as Léonie's face had perhaps the feeblest capacity for concealment of any which ever existed, Mrs. Ponsonby felt satisfied that, whatever else had passed between her and Sir Edgar, the latter had not in any degree compromised herself; that Léonie was still wholly ignorant of the deceit she had practised.

And such indeed was the fact. Léonie retained the suspicions in regard to Mrs. Ponsonby which she had intimated in her conversation with Hatty, but only, as yet, in a general way; she did not connect them with any specific act. At present, indeed, she was too much agitated by the late scene to think of Mrs. Ponsonby at all.

Some trifling conversation passed, in which

neither of the persons present made any reference to the subject which was uppermost in her thoughts. Then Léonie, under some conventional form of request from Mrs. Ponsonby, went back to her piano. She had seated herself there after dinner as a relief to her loneliness and excited feelings, and was as glad now to escape to it again as Mrs. Ponsonby was to secure the succeeding half-hour for her own purposes.

Meanwhile, Sir Edgar's reflections had taken a very different turn to what his sister-in-law supposed. For a few moments indeed he still thought of her, of the cheat she had passed upon him,—for he made no doubt of her misstatement having been intentional,—of the possible motives by which she might have been actuated.

But this phase of feeling speedily passed; his mind again became exclusively occupied with the still heavier guilt which lay at his own door. "What am I myself," he exclaimed, "that I should charge her thus? False and treacherous as she may have been, she was only indirectly the cause of what happened; she did not, of express purpose and choice, doom an innocent life as I did. If she knew all, even she would fly horror-struck from my doors! But she shall know all," he continued, as the design he had already formed recurred to his thoughts; "she and all the world shall. My crime was secret; its expiation shall be made in the light of day. The first business transacted at our justices' meeting to-morrow shall be that Sir Edgar Brereton charges himself before his brother magistrates as a

murderer and a villain; the wilful murderer of his own unoffending child! The law cannot touch it, I know; but such part of the penalty as can be inflicted shall be, the ignominy, the execration, the ostracism from the speech and fellowship, from the touch and sight, of all living men! Meanwhile, let this preliminary act be done. Poor Caroline! poor wife! Her life too shipwrecked, if not actually taken, by my fierce wrath: her contrition, when she knelt, humbling herself before me, imploring my mercy, my forgiveness, spurned away from me as I would have spurned a dog; left to plunge herself yet deeper in shame and wretchedness, perhaps, before I would stretch out a hand to save her! Let this tardy atonement be made to her also. Wholly ineffectual, probably; she may not be living; I may be unable to find her, even if she is. But let my hand be set to it at all events; this very night, before aught else is done!"

As Sir Edgar spoke he drew his chair to the table and began writing. As he did so, his ear too was caught by the mass-music which Léonie was playing, and of which, in his previous excitement, he had been unconscious. He now sate and listened in spite of himself. As the piece proceeded, the solemn Kyrie eleison of the opening rising into the first jubilant movements of the "Gloria," and then again followed, a few pages later, by the pleading "Qui tollis peccata mundi," the man's soul was moved in its depths. A flood of memories, school-life, college, his love and marriage, his child's birth, swept over him; identifying themselves with this or

that portion of the music; reproducing, in vivid contrast with the present, the images of a time when he was still as other men, when the page of the future might still have been inscribed so differently!

Sir Edgar could not resist them. Leaning his head forward on both arms, he wept long and very bitterly.

Presently, however, he again roused himself. "Idle folly!" he exclaimed; "what have I to do with tears; have I any right to them, I who have steeled myself against all gentleness, all mercy? And could they undo the past, even if I had? Let me to my task!"

Sir Edgar finished his letter. Not many sentences, although the strength of the feelings under which he wrote again and again hindered his pen; the words which presented themselves seemed so poor, so feeble! Then he rang the bell. He had tasted nothing for many hours, and felt worn-out, in body as well as mind.

"Shall I order some dinner, Sir Edgar?" asked the butler Norris, who appeared in answer to the summons, and was distressed at his master's evident exhaustion. "I did not keep it on table, as you had given no orders, but something can be got ready almost directly."

Sir Edgar shook his head. "I cannot, Norris," he said: "I cannot eat."

"Perhaps I had best bring in the decanters, Sir Edgar?" Norris again asked. But his master again refused. He had no heart for wine; almost, in his

agony of feeling, recoiled from the thought of it as a profanation.

"The ladies have ordered coffee in about half-an-hour," Norris then suggested; "perhaps . . ."

"That will do," said Sir Edgar, interrupting him; "you can bring it me here. Bring a large cup; I am thirsty."

* * * * *

The morning of the seventeenth dawned; cloudless and bright as its predecessor had been, but speedily overcast with a dense mist.

The household at Ceniarth were stirring at the accustomed hour. Mrs. Ponsonby was still buried in slumber. At least, the maid who went to call her had unusual difficulty in rousing her.

"Is that you, Davis?" she asked at last, still in a tone of extreme drowsiness.

"Yes, Ma'am, if you please; it is half-past eight; a very foggy morning, Ma'am."

"Half-past eight? Really?" said Mrs. Ponsonby, raising herself in bed: "I had no idea that it was so late! How soundly I must have slept all night! I was tired, I suppose; I have not woke once since I got into bed at eleven."

"The weather is tiring, Ma'am," said Davis, who, after the fashion of good servants, felt it incumbent on her not only to echo her employer's sentiment but to find a corroborative reason for it.

At this juncture a further knock was heard at the door. Mrs. Ponsonby enquired what it was, and Davis went out to report accordingly.

She did not return at once; not for a minute or

two. Some earnest, but very low, almost terrified, whispering went on outside the door; too low for Mrs. Ponsonby to catch what the words were, although she strained every sense to do so. She did not hurry the speakers, however. No indeed; let them take their own time!

In fact, when Davis re-appeared, somnolence had again supervened, and Mrs. Ponsonby's eyes were fast sealed under its influence.

"Mrs. Ponsonby! Ma'am!" exclaimed Davis, in great agitation, "I beg your pardon, but please can you get up directly. There's something so terrible have happened."

"Happened! terrible!" echoed Mrs. Ponsonby, rousing herself at once, and sitting upright. "What do you mean! what is the matter?"

"Oh! Ma'am, poor Sir Edgar!" said the woman, sobbing in her grief and terror: "he's dead, Ma'am, quite dead. That's Susan outside; and she found him so a quarter of an hour ago, in the library, when she went to open the shutters. They haven't liked to tell you before."

"Dead!" ejaculated Mrs. Ponsonby, wringing her hands with a frantic gesture: "give me the dressing-gown, Davis; let me go to him instantly!"

"If you please, Ma'am," said Davis, hesitating, "I . . . I think if you would wait a short time it would be better. Susan says it was . . . was something you didn't ought to see, special with that bad pain coming on you as it does, Ma'am; it might bring it on again. It were poison, I am afeard,

Ma'am," added Davis, coming up close to Mrs. Ponsonby, and speaking very low.

"*Poison!*" Mrs. Ponsonby again repeated.

"Yes, Ma'am," said Davis, "something he have taken with the coffee the butler brought him last night. He had a packet of it in his dressing-room, Susan says, up on one of the shelves: they've often a seed it there. And now, when they looked, there were ever so much of it found strewed about there, and more in the library, between the door and the table. He must have gone upstairs and fetched it, they think."

"Davis, I must go at once: this is terrible!" again exclaimed Mrs. Ponsonby; although, even while thus insisting, she contrived to occupy as much time as possible in the preliminary arrangements.

She was in no hurry, unquestionably, to face that spectacle! To face again what she had already, for the purpose of securing her own safety, had to encounter once within the twelve hours! Even when the dressing-gown was properly adjusted, she interposed some further questions. They were part of a fore-arranged plan, carried out with a firmness strangely in contrast with the terror which sat at the woman's heart!

"Davis!" she cried vehemently; "this is frightful, inconceivable. Why should my poor brother-in-law have done what you say? What motive could he have had?"

"Indeed, Ma'am, and I can't say," answered the attendant; "but you know, Ma'am, he do seem to have been very much troubled in his mind lately

about something. And Norris were saying in the servants' hall last night, Ma'am, if you please, that poor Sir Edgar looked quite ghastly-like when he went in to him. Perhaps, Ma'am," added Davis, "if you was to look, there might be some paper; something he have wrote. They do that, I have heard, oftentimes when they are in that way, just to shew why it all was, like; there were a nephew of Mr. Sinclair's, that was my last place you know, Ma'am, as did it."

"I will go and see at once," replied Mrs. Ponsonby. And this time she really did go downstairs.

The servants still withheld her for some time, until the body was removed elsewhere. Then she entered the library, Norris, and indeed the greater part of the domestics, accompanying her: their anxiety for news was irresistible, and Mrs. Ponsonby, whose plans were compatible with having as many witnesses as possible, made no objection. Léonie was also there; she had heard what had happened only a few minutes before.

"Davis thinks we might find something," said Mrs. Ponsonby to the latter; "some writing which might explain this dreadful, dreadful occurrence! I have not the heart to search myself; will you do so?"

Léonie darted at the speaker a look of keen inquiry; her old suspicions as to Mrs. Ponsonby revived now with still greater force than ever. Could she be in any way concerned in this new calamity?

The surmise however was dispelled almost as soon as it had arisen.

The search which Léonie made in compliance with Mrs. Ponsonby's request speedily disclosed the letter which Sir Edgar had written overnight, before ringing for Norris. It was addressed "Lady Brereton;" the lower part of the envelope left blank, doubtless to be filled in, in the event of the deceased baronet ascertaining his wife's place of residence. The letter itself ran as follows:

"Caroline.

"You will probably not recognise my handwriting; if you do, you will only know it as that of the man who has wronged and injured you. But you must know something further about him now. Know him, not only as the remorseless husband who in your bitter anguish drove you from him, but as one whose very name men will now chase from their memories; as a murderer; the deliberate murderer of his own child! If you have ever prayed for his punishment, your prayer has been heard; if you have ever thirsted for revenge, take it now! Listen.

"You left a child with him, a mere babe then; Alice: more than twenty years ago that, now. The babe grew up, his only daughter, his only child. In his pride and pitilessness, all her growing up, he shut his heart against her; in his pride and pitilessness he has now—killed her. The circumstances of her death, as far as they are known to others, you will hear from them. She was drowned; she attempted to cross the bridge between this house and the village at a time when it was unsafe, and was lost in the attempt. But there was something else which others do not know; her father's share in the

matter. He was deeply incensed against her at the time; deeply, and, as he then thought, justly. He believed her to have acted with deliberate perfidy towards one of her own sex, played her false in a love affair; no need to go into that. He was utterly mistaken, but he believed this, and thought he had reason to do so; perhaps most men would have done the same.

"But he did what, in the world's history, none perhaps have ever done, so foully, so remorselessly. He chased away from him this only child of his, blameless as she was, in thought as in act, of the guilt he imputed to her; drove her forth, as he had done yourself, unheard, unquestioned: saw her quit the house;—saw her follow the path to that bridge! Saw this, and let her go there, knowing that it was to death. Dooming her to it; making himself, in his hardness, his pride, his short-sightedness, her judge at once and her executioner!

"And now I have done. I ask you for no forgiveness, either for my treatment of yourself, or for this last crowning act of evil; I deserve none. I hope for none. I hope for nothing; nothing but death: that will not be long in coming.

"EDGAR BRERETON."

Profound as was the agitation caused in the minds of all present by the perusal of this letter, it had a tranquillising effect in one respect; it precluded any doubt, had such been capable of being entertained, as to the writer having perished by his own act. Even Léonie could not resist the conclusion thus

forced upon her. The suspicion which had been awakened in her mind on the first discovery of what had happened still rested there as a feeling which she could not wholly shake off; but she was compelled to own to herself that it was merely a feeling; that it had no solid ground of reason to justify it.

The one person who knew to the contrary found the result even more satisfactory.

In her previous visit to the library that night Mrs. Ponsonby had found the letter in the place from which Léonie afterwards took it; just outside Sir Edgar's desk. It was unsealed, and with trembling hands she opened it and scrutinised the contents.

Even in the intense personal agitation of the moment, some feeling of added horror crossed Mrs. Ponsonby's mind on learning, as she now did for the first time, that Sir Edgar had actually seen Alice on her way to the spot where the catastrophe had occurred! But this was soon dissipated; and with very sufficient reason. The document supplied two of Mrs. Ponsonby's most pressing exigencies. It assured her of the immunity from the external consequences of the act which, as we have seen, in fact did result from the discovery of the letter on the following morning. And it enabled her, in some fashion, to justify the act to herself!

Not quite immediate indeed, this further result. The matter was hard of digestion, of deglutition even; some bone-crushing and working into shape before it would go down. But it did go down at last; really quite easily. Why not?

Properly viewed, Mrs. Ponsonby's agency in the matter had been simply "ministerial." She had not the term at command, but she felt what it expressed; she had been a mere instrument in the hands of an over-ruling power. Here was the criminal, one whom by his own confession human law could not touch, delivered over into her hands: the implement provided, the occasion fitted in and mortised to a hair's breadth, the blow struck, the call for justice satisfied! Was she to blame?

True, she had done it in self-defence, but what did that signify? Venial, even that; while in the very doing, all management, all direction had been taken from her; she had become the passive agent in the execution of an overmastering law of retribution!

Some days later, was it, that Mrs. Ponsonby began to feel this comforting assurance? Or, some hours?

Quite soon enough, at all events. The shock came and went, and then the consolation took its place; and Mrs. Ponsonby, now that the imminence of her fear was removed, found herself capable of enjoying life much as usual!

A few weeks after the late occurrence at Ceniarth she went abroad, Léonie accompanying her. The latter was now homeless; and notwithstanding the dislike which she felt to Mrs. Ponsonby, as well as the mistrust of which she still at times found it impossible wholly to divest herself, her want of any other protection, as well as the gloomy associations connected with Ceniarth, induced her to fall in with this arrangement.

Léonie's acceptance of his mother's escort was also pressed upon her by Stephen, who had now, it should be added, in some sort a legal control over Léonie. It was found that the will hastily executed by Sir Edgar in her favour two years before, although complete in other respects, had been, through an oversight, left deficient in one point; it had appointed no executor. Under these circumstances, "administration with the will annexed," as the legal phrase runs, had been granted to Stephen Ponsonby as next of kin to the deceased; and Léonie, during the period which had still to elapse before she would attain twenty-one, was nominally under his control. That she should continue to reside under Mrs. Ponsonby's tutelage was accordingly natural, and, as it would have appeared, suitable in every respect; and when the latter started on her trip to the Continent, Léonie, almost as a matter of course, went with her.

Mrs. Ponsonby meanwhile, as we have said, found herself capable of enjoying such satisfactions as her foreign sojourn offered, and to which Léonie's income largely contributed, with no great abatement of their zest in consequence of the past.

Quite capable, that is, in the first instance. Disturbing causes did by-and-bye supervene, the nature and results of which shall be stated in a future chapter. For the present, we must return to some of the other personages of our story, taking up its thread at a date about nine months after Sir Edgar's death.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A REHEARSAL of the Ammergau Passion play is just over. Rehearsals are all to which it is destined this year; the Franco-German war has broken out, and the actors are summoned next week to their military duties, relegating the full performance to a later period.

The rehearsal however has occupied the same time, and been as complete in all particulars, as the play itself would have been. It has lasted nine hours, from eight in the morning to five in the afternoon. The benches in the vast enclosure, with the sky for a roof and the blue mountains for a background, crowded throughout by the peasantry of the district. The rustic auditory thus collected, intent upon a representation artistic at once and reverent, and in which the unpaid and unlettered actors seem, in their marvellous realisation of the past, to have made themselves as familiar with the Jewish Sanhedrim as they are with the vine-slopes of their own Bavarian highlands.

A local audience; and almost exclusively so; the war has prevented many strangers being present as spectators. There are two or three English however. Amongst the latter one whom we have lost sight of for some time; Reginald Mansel.

The months which have elapsed in the interval

have abated, as they always must do, happily, something of the extremity of Reginald's grief. But it is still very bitter. All the more so, because in his horror at the disclosure made to him by Lady Brereton, he shrinks from the most distant reproduction, even in thought, of the face and form which, under other circumstances, and however separated from her, would have been present to cheer his solitude.

True, even these do recur to him. In sleep, in dreams, Léonie's image revisits him; it haunts every thoroughfare; peers from the recesses of every woodland, looks at him in the sunshine and in the night-watch of stars. But he thrusts it from him whenever and wherever he can do so, sternly; without compromise; like a haunting fiend;—how should he not?

Reginald's best auxiliary in these months of wretchedness has been the necessity of working; working for his mother's support in England. He has no difficulty in providing the means of this now; work means money; the one or two pieces which he has thrown off during his residence abroad have added as well to his reputation as to its tangible results. Still, the result has had to be produced; and the imperative need of this has stood him in good stead, diverting his mind from topics on which it would otherwise have dwelt with perilous exclusiveness.

The Ammergau play has come as an episode in this work; part of a summer holiday. The previous months, since Reginald's quitting England, have

been spent by him at Dresden. This July, he has gone south, rambling with no very settled purpose, although with the intention eventually of witnessing the play.

He is not staying at Ammergau, however, but in a secluded little village near it; Garmisch. On his return there after the performance, two other of the English spectators have shared a car with him as far as Partenkirch. From the latter, Garmisch is an easy walk, and Reginald is now pursuing it.

The fern-bordered path, shut in by walls of cliff with the stream brawling alongside of it, proved exquisite after the heat of the day. Reginald has followed it at his leisure; pausing to admire the detail around him, and now and then catching glimpses, between the firs, of the Zug Spitze or conical Wachsenstein, dazzling at first in their snowy whiteness, and then, as the sun dips, bathed in a flood of rosy light.

The sun has dipped altogether before Reginald enters Garmisch.

The dun-coloured cows are already there on their way home from the pastures, their bells tinkling from end to end of the village; here and there, one of the herd, as she reaches the gate of her own byre, drops out of the procession unrebuked, and stands lowing for admittance.

And at the door of the old-fashioned inn is Agnes, the active, blue-eyed kellnerinn, on the lookout for him, for he is at least an hour behind his time; the Fräulein Theresa, the daughter of the

hostess, has just joined her, and in the intervals of watching the two are conversing eagerly.

Plenty of topics between them: plenty, if to-morrow did not supersede all others. To-morrow is a high day in Garmisch. It is Corpus Christi, in any event, and there will be the procession with the Virgin, and the dressing the graves in the churchyard. But, besides this, to-morrow the new bell is to be lifted to its place; it arrived from Innsbruck a week ago, but the ceremony has been deferred in honour of the festival. And of course, under these circumstances, the special aspect under which to-morrow is discussed is that of the weather. Beautiful as the evening is, it is not without some evil auguries; and both girls have been looking anxiously at a bank of clouds projected from the horizon on one side of the Wachsenstein cone, which it seems endeavouring to emulate in shape and colour. As Agnes has just observed, "The Mother of God must not get wet."

For the present, however, their anxieties are suspended by the appearance of Reginald. Agnes is the first to see him, and points him out to her companion: then they both stand looking at him as he traverses the pitched street of the village.

"He is handsome," said Agnes.

The Fräulein made no reply, but continued looking at Reginald with fixed attention.

"Not handsome like Fritz or Stein, of course," said Agnes, qualifying an assertion to which her companion seemed hardly disposed to assent; "These English have not the open countenances or the

limbs of our young men. But he is passably good-looking."

"He is very handsome," said the Fräulein; "I was not thinking of that. I was trying to recall who he is so like."

"Nobody in these parts?" asked Agnes.

"No; some one English; as you say, child, they have little likeness to ourselves. But some one, too, whom I have seen not very long since."

"Where?" asked Agnes.

"That is what I cannot remember," answered her companion.

"Some man, I suppose?" Agnes asked again.

The Fräulein mused. "Yes, I sup . . . No, no," she added, suddenly interrupting herself as the recollection dawned upon her; "of course not. It is that poor young English lady."

"What lady?"

"The one who was governess in the family of the Baroness Reichardt, and whom she was obliged to leave behind last month from her being so ill. But I am forgetting; you did not see her, Agnes."

"She was never here," said Agnes; "where did you see her?"

"At Partenkirch; they stayed at the 'Three Kings' there, which you know is kept by my mother's sister. The Baroness was very kind to the poor thing, and when she was obliged to go south herself, she left my aunt money for her."

"May the Virgin reward her!" said Agnes. "But is the poor young lady still with your aunt?"

"She will not be with her much longer," an-

swered the Fräulein. "I heard a few days since that she appeared to be sinking; she was very ill when I saw her. And she is quite desolate there; neither friends nor relations with her."

"But this gentleman is so like her, you say?" asked Agnes.

"Strangely like," said the Fräulein; "almost her copy in face, and the same mournful, dark look about them both; only then, of course, she was so ill besides."

"Perhaps he is some relative," said Agnes; "I will find out. What is her name?"

"That I cannot recollect either now," said Theresa; "a curious name; I should know it again if I heard it. But here he is coming in," she added.

"Yes," said Agnes, darting indoors, "and to think that I have forgotten his egg! He always has one in the evening with tea, and he likes them so very, very hard!"

So Agnes busied herself with her preparations accordingly.

Not with entire success, it may be added; reasonable or unreasonable, Reginald's tastes were not to be gratified. When the tea-board was laid, exquisitely appetising in all other respects, the egg which appeared proved, on opening it, to be perfectly liquid.

"Well, the marvel that it is!" said Agnes, gazing at the spectacle incredulously; "so careful as I was to say my three Pater Nosters while it was boiling! But I shall bring one other almost directly."

"No, never mind," said Reginald: "I am not hungry. I got some dinner at Partenkirch."

Partenkirch! That was where the sick English lady was, the one who so resembled their guest in face!

Agnes's curiosity as well as her kindly feeling had been aroused by her conversation with the Fräulein; she had forgotten the matter in the bustle of preparing Reginald's meal, but the name of the little market-town now recalled it to her. "Even if they are not related," she thought to herself, "he doubtless knows her; they are both English. And he is rich, he can get her luxuries; perhaps too, as he is so grave, he is one of their priests. They are not the true Church, but, holy Virgin, it is not my affair."

So Agnes communicated the substance of what she had learnt from the Fräulein.

Reginald's sympathy was strongly excited. "He would go without fail to the 'Three Kings' to-morrow and enquire for the young lady," he said. "There could be nothing intrusive in his doing so under the circumstances; and perhaps, in her lonely condition, the presence of a countryman of her own might be some comfort. Agnes did not know her name?"

No, the Fräulein had not known either. She would ask again, though, to-morrow; Theresa might have recollected it by that time.

The next morning, which dawned most auspiciously for the *fête*, bright, calm, and cloudless, not only made Agnes oblivious of her proposed enquiry,

but brought with it such complications of household duties as carried her for several hours out of Reginald's sight and hearing. He was anxious, however, to pay his visit at Partenkirch, and contrived for a moment to get audience of the Fräulein.

The latter however still shook her head in reply to his question; the name had not come back to her. She made one or two ineffectual attempts, and then abandoned the task in despair.

"But what name did they ask for?" interposed a rosy-cheeked damsel who was seated in what in England would be called the bar; regaling herself, we are compelled to add, on some vigorous slices of uncooked ham, qualified by a glass tankard of beer which it would be an affront to measure by pints. "It was of Partenkirch they spoke," she continued, still addressing Reginald, to whom the previous question had been directed; "I am myself from Partenkirch. Whom do they seek there?"

"A young English lady," said Reginald, who was sufficiently master of German for the occasion; "the one who is so ill at the 'Three Kings.' Do you know her name?"

"That wis I well, but can not well speak," replied his interlocutor. "But so a pencil I had, so could I it write," she continued, observing the disappointment which Reginald's face expressed.

A pencil was procured, and the speaker commenced her task.

A somewhat difficult one, apparently; the consecution of the letters puzzled her. She began quite easily at first;—"Bē;—great Bē," she added

by way of explanation: but, what follows thereby; how full of pitfalls is this English! "Ahr? So; yes surely. Then ěr; then ahr again, then er again, then a tē; and an och, and an n: Bē, ahr, ěr, ahr, ěr, tē, och, n. But, Theresa, what makes amiss? Have I offended?"

Reginald's face and manner were certainly enough to justify this exclamation. He turned deadly pale, almost staggering in his astonishment and dismay.

That name, of all others! The name which had been so present to his thoughts for so many months, night and day! The name which, alas! alas! so fatally in the events which had happened, he bore himself, or was entitled to bear; must bear, should his disguise ever be rent from him;—Brereton!

And was Léonie there, at Partenkirch; only those few miles from him; friendless, succourless, dying? Must he not go to her, at all hazards?

Oh! yes. If that hand was stamped upon it, let him go, in God's name: death would rectify all that had so strangely gone amiss. Might the death only, only have been his own!

A moment's reflection, too, suggested a far better reason for not declining to pay his intended visit. In the first moment of surprise he had assumed that this was Léonie: but what necessity was there to assume this? Not a very common name, Brereton; but certainly, not one confined to a single family; many others, besides Léonie, who

might bear it! Let him start on his mission forthwith!

Apologising to his informant for the abruptness with which he had received her communication, Reginald took his way to the market-town, where he had no difficulty in finding the "Three Kings."

Not the leading hostelry of the place; that had happened to be full when the baroness arrived; but clean and attractive. Reginald explained the object of his visit, and, as an inmate of the allied establishment at Garmisch, was at once received on a footing of confidence.

"The young lady was rather better," the hostess said in answer to his questions; "the warm weather had been of service to her. There was no hope; so certainly none, that the doctors said it would be cruelty for her even to undergo the fatigue of moving elsewhere in the hope of obtaining any cure. But for the present she was a little stronger, able to sit up for two or three hours every day. They had given her up their own sitting-room whenever she was well enough to use it: she was there at present. Should they announce him?"

CHAPTER XIX.

A SMALL but pleasant apartment, opening with French windows on the garden of the inn, from which the light summer air wafted in the fragrance of rose and clematis.

Seated on a couch near one of the windows, her eye resting on the distant mountain view which it afforded, a slight, sorely wasted, attenuated figure; still young, still beautiful. Even more beautiful, perhaps, in the present transparent delicacy of the features than it might have appeared in health and strength. Reginald's eye took in all this. Took in this, and another fact:—the person he looked upon was an entire stranger.

A stranger?

Yes. Even had sight been wanting, the voice would have told him that, as it replied to the apology which he hastily framed for his intrusion. As far as the evidence of the senses went, a total, absolute stranger!

And yet, in the very recognition of the fact, there was a still more powerful voice at his heart which warned him that, for some reason which he could neither state nor justify, they were not wholly strange to each other; that there was something in common between them. Something, even over and above the singular likeness which would have forced

itself upon the notice of any third person who had been present; and which, even in the first embarrassment of their meeting, did not escape the consciousness of either of the persons who shared it.

How should it do so, when the brother and sister sat thus together, side by side, for the first time? Sat thus, speedily to be parted, when the fast-waning life of one had reached the term which was now so palpably allotted it. Sat thus, suspecting naught of that strange relationship; and yet, in the mysterious sympathies of nature, drawn together by an impulse which neither could resist?

The brother and sister;—the brother and the real sister; Alice Brereton.

Yes: so it was.

The doom which Sir Edgar had pronounced against Alice, and for which he had himself paid so heavy a penalty, had only been partially fulfilled. He had doomed her to death; had yielded her to it, remorselessly, unflinchingly. But the execution of the sentence had been delayed; delayed these weeks and months, running thus into years. On the point of execution now, or at no great distance of time, quite irretrievably; but delayed until now!

Alice had not perished, as was supposed, in the catastrophe at Ceniarth.

Broken-hearted, and little heeding where she went, she had obeyed her father's orders, taking the direct foot-path by the bridge. She was aware, in a general way, that the latter was unsafe, but had no knowledge of the state in which it had been

reported to be on the day in question; indeed, her pre-occupation and agitated feeling would have banished the matter from her mind in any event.

As she approached the bridge however, she paused, in spite of herself. It was obviously insecure; the stream beneath, too, running with great violence, and much raised in level. Its level, in fact, risen almost to that of the wooden planking in the centre; in one portion, actually flowing over the latter!

Alice was most unwilling, however, to give up the attempt. The road, which led by a considerable détour to the village, could only be gained by returning to the house; and after the peremptory commands she had received from Sir Edgar, Alice's natural pride, no less than her feeling of obedience, shrunk from contradicting them. She accordingly made the venture.

A few short steps across; but attended with difficulty and delay. The bridge was swaying in the most ominous manner, and even the brief pause she had made had increased the depth of water on the planking; practically, its surface was now under water.

Alice again hesitated; reluctant as she was to go back, there was apparently no other course. She accordingly turned with that object. But it was too late.

A boom, like that of an avalanche-slide; distant, and then, almost in the same moment, close upon her. Simultaneously with this, as it appeared, leaving her barely time, with a cry of terror, to

grasp the wooden hand-rail of the bridge, a rushing, surging mass; something which struck away herself and her frail support as if they had been thistle-down, whirling them hopelessly before it. Then, darkness; unconsciousness; oblivion of all sight and all sound!

Hopeless destruction—as it would have seemed. And yet, in reality, the vehemence of the agent to which the structure had at last succumbed was the means of securing Alice's safety.

The flood quickly spent its violence in the lower and more open portion of the valley, while it retained force enough to carry the massive framework, to which Alice, although wholly insensible, clung with a convulsive grip, across the sand-bar at the mouth of the stream. And here rescue was at hand. The thunder-shower of the afternoon had been succeeded by a clear, still evening; and the captain of a Prussian trader on its return from Bristol, who was then off the Gower coast and at no great distance from the land, was attracted by the appearance of some white object floating in the direction of the vessel. His curiosity was excited; and as they were making but leisurely progress, he directed a boat to be lowered and pulled towards it.

Great was his surprise, as well as that of the crew who accompanied him, when they discovered what this was. They at once however extricated Alice from her perilous position and rowed her to the ship; which she reached in fact, owing to the rapidity with which she had been carried down by

the stream, at no great interval of time after the fall of the bridge.

Comparatively short, however, as this period had been, Alice's submersion proved all but fatal to her, and it was long before animation could be restored. This being the case, and a breeze having now sprung up, the captain decided on continuing his course; it would be easy, should his involuntary passenger wish it, to transfer her to some homeward-bound vessel on the following day. A bed was accordingly arranged for Alice in the cabin of two women who happened to be on board, and by their care, and the remedies which they persevered in applying, she at length regained consciousness.

Regained this. But only to bear henceforth a doomed life. Something told her this, even in the first moments of restoration; something which, in the bitterness which that life must henceforth be, Alice hailed as her best friend. She saw the captain on the following morning, and thanked him warmly for her deliverance. To his offer of sending her back she replied in the negative; entering into little detail, but telling him that she was homeless and friendless, and had in fact been on her way, probably to quit the country, when the accident took place.

Alice was accordingly landed at the Prussian port to which the ship was bound, and at once put into execution a plan, which she had formed during the voyage, of engaging herself as governess in some German family. She had money with her for current expenses, and after a month or two suc-

ceeded in procuring a situation with the baroness of whom Theresa had spoken.

Meanwhile, the seeds of the malady had already begun to develop themselves. It did not make much head at first. Alice was still able to continue her duties in the school-room, where she had attached her pupils to her, as well as every one else in the house, with feelings of genuine affection.

In the second year, however, of this governess life, her strength hopelessly gave way. She was compelled to give up actual teaching, but at the request of her employer still continued to reside in the house as a companion, whenever her rapidly-declining power admitted it, to her children as well as to herself.

Unfortunately, some couple of months before the date which our narrative has now reached, the baroness and her family were summoned to Naples, where the husband of the former held a diplomatic appointment. They took the route through Bavaria, Alice still accompanying them; it was hoped by her kind-hearted friends that the change of scene, followed by a residence in the milder climate of the south, might alleviate if it could not remove her illness. At Partenkirch however Alice became so seriously indisposed as to be incapable of continuing her journey, and the baroness, with extreme reluctance, was compelled to proceed without her.

It is time however to return to the interview which this recapitulation has interrupted.

Nothing indeed of special moment passed on this occasion. Reginald frankly explained the ob-

ject of his visit, and was as frankly met by Alice. She felt better to-day, she said, and had greatly enjoyed coming down to the room which the kindness of her hostess allowed her to occupy. She too had heard of the Garmisch *fête*, and expressed her regret that her visitor's kindness had prevented his visiting it. Then they talked of the Ammergau play; and Reginald, animated by his subject as well as by the deep enthusiasm, so kindred to his own, with which Alice listened to his account of it, sketched for her actors and audience; the Pilate, the Judas, the weeping maidens, the Divine Sufferer!

Then, suddenly recollecting how long he had been sitting there, and how little fitted Alice was to endure any fatigue, Reginald approached the special object of his visit. Was there . . . could he in any pecuniary way help to lighten her illness? Something might be procured from Munich, even England, perhaps? some better medical assistance called in?

No; Alice had everything which skill or money could supply: the fund generously left by the baroness was still far from exhausted. But she thanked her visitor equally for his kind thought of her.

"You will come again?" she asked, as she smilingly held out her hand to him when he at length took leave; some feeling which she could not resist compelled her to ask this.

"May I come?" asked Reginald in reply, fervently pressing the thin, fair hand in his own; "it will make me so happy; may I come every day?"

"That would be a heavy tax even upon your

kindness, Mr. Mansel; I must not be so selfish as to exact anything of the kind," said Alice. But she had not the heart to tell him not to come, selfish as it was.

Still less could Reginald keep away from that invalid's room at the Three Kings; an irresistible force seemed to draw him there. He still retained his old quarters at Garmisch; but day after day found him on the road to Partenkirch, at the earliest hour at which it was possible that Alice might have come down-stairs.

Among the simple-minded inhabitants of the place, these visits excited no comment. The general belief was that Reginald had discovered in the person for whom he exhibited so much interest not only a countrywoman but a relative; and this was aided by the remarkable likeness between them, which became more evident every time their faces were compared, as well as by the emotion he had shewn on first hearing Alice's name mentioned. But, besides this, the steadily-increasing illness of the latter, would, in any event, have obviated cavil. It was apparent that the end, although delayed for the time being, was not in reality far distant; and the compassionate villagers were only too pleased, under these circumstances, that she should meet with the sympathy and interest of some one from her own people.

And so these strange meetings went on. Heart meeting heart; tracing out resemblances, identifying interests, in a daily interchange of thought and feeling which had such elements of love in it, and

yet was fenced off by such an impassable barrier, unknown and yet instinctively recognised by both, from that which constitutes love-making!

Hand in hand, as it were, they advanced towards the portals of one great mystery; stood together in the vestibule and outer chamber of death. Behind them, shrouding the past under a veil almost as mysterious, lay the untold, unsuspected secret of their own lives!

A secret still. Intimate as was their present companionship, it excluded, by a tacit kind of mutual understanding, and almost as the condition of its subsistence, all elements of personal reference. If Alice naturally shrunk from these, Reginald did so still more. The subject personal to himself, to the exclusion of all others, was one on which his tongue must be for ever sealed; a stranger to thought as to speech. While, on the other hand, the fear of wounding others habitual to a sensitive mind deterred him from even the suspicion of prying into the history of the person with whom he was thrown into such close intercourse.

One strong impulse indeed he often felt. That name which she bore! The name which had startled him so much when he first heard it spelt out at Garmisch; her name of Brereton; he felt a longing thirst to ask her something about that! But he could not bring himself to do so, could not force his lips to it. The subject was too terrible.

No. A secret to each other they had still remained. But they were not to remain such much longer.

CHAPTER XX.

THREE weeks have passed, bringing the date to September; nearly the middle of the month, but still warm and genial as in summer.

Alice still came down to the little sitting-room, although for a shorter time each day now than formerly. Her strength was slowly waning; and although its declension could hardly be traced from one period of twenty-four hours to another, yet, taking the week together, there was always some perceptible diminution of force; something which had been done the week before, but had now to be left unattempted.

It was a lovely forenoon. The harvest had begun even in those upland valleys; and as Reginald approached Partenkirch, emerging from the defile of the stream into the cultivated ground which adjoined the humble town, the fields were a picture of mirth and activity.

In the mind of the spectator however who now looked upon them, they offered a painful contrast to the thoughts with which he was himself occupied. This unknown life, which had become so strangely interwoven in sympathy with his own, not displacing, but seeming as it were to stand as the representative, the blameless, permitted representative, of that other one which he must never again associate with his without hideous sin; this other "Miss Brereton:" how was she too now passing from him!

Disguise it from himself as he would, Reginald could not wholly shut his eyes to the change that was going on in his new companion. Every day, as he quitted the Three Kings, he apprehended that the next might bring some interruption of the intercourse which had such a powerful fascination for him; that he might find she was too weak to occupy her sitting-room; possibly even that some darker and more fatal form of the disorder than had yet shown itself had supervened.

On this day, it was with a feeling of excitement for which he could assign no sufficient cause that he presented himself at the door of the hostelry; he trembled to think what answer his enquiry for their guest might receive.

For a moment too his apprehensions seemed confirmed. "Die Englische," as Alice was usually called at the Three Kings, had not come downstairs yet.

What did this mean? usually she was in the sitting-room by this hour, waiting to receive him. Was she unwell?

No, the blow had not been struck, as yet.

Not quite so strong this morning, the *kellnerinn* reported on inquiry, but quite well otherwise; if he would kindly wait a few minutes, the young lady would join him.

Reginald seated himself in the room accordingly. On the table there lay a sketch-book; Alice had been making some slight drawing of the view from the window,—a mere pencil sketch only; she did not attempt colours like Léonie;—and this she

had shown him at one of their previous meetings. He took up the book now to pass the time, and looked through it.

A few sketches made during their journey through Bavaria; these were all, excepting the recently-commenced Partenkirch view.

All; in the portion of the book which Reginald at first opened; not occupying many pages. He turned over the blank leaves which succeeded, hoping to find more. But unsuccessfully. Nothing appeared.

Nothing, until the last page. There, there was a sketch; executed with far more care than those at the other end. Drawn in the reverse direction of the page; Reginald had to turn the book in order to examine it.

A sketch which rather puzzled him. The book had been purchased in Munich—the bookseller's label on the outside showed him this;—doubtless, on the owner's recent journey southward. All the drawings at the other end of it were palpably in correspondence with this; towns, chateaux, mountain scenery.

But what he was now looking at was something wholly different; something which by no possibility could present itself for delineation in Bavaria.

A sea-beach. None which Reginald had ever in fact seen, although with no actual speciality about it; probably, in its details, like a score of others. Sand and shingle; the waves rippling in. In the background a few straggling cottages, the blocks of stone by which their roofs were secured

against the wind forming a prominent feature in the drawing. On the beach two children seated, a boy and a girl. On one side of these latter, a lofty, swart cliff.

What was this view?

Reginald was perplexed. For a moment, only, however: of course it might be a copy. Hardly like one, indeed, in the minute care, the identification with which every detail was filled in; besides, the scene was unmistakably English. Still, it might be so.

He was still pondering the matter when Alice herself entered. As the servant had reported, she looked perceptibly less strong to-day; her face more Madonna-like than ever in its transparent, unearthly beauty. She greeted Reginald however as brightly as ever, and some general conversation passed. Then he took up the sketch-book. Some impulse of curiosity on his own part prompted him to do so, but the question which he put was mainly for his companion's sake;—the drawing on which she had bestowed so much time and thought must be one of special interest for her.

“What was this view? was it a copy?”

Alice's cheek was suffused in an instant with a deep flush, exhibiting the features as they might have appeared in earlier and happier times. She hesitated a moment before answering. But what need for concealment with this stranger; a stranger, much as they had been thrown together, to all the antecedents of her life?—even had the latter not been rapidly on the wane, as Alice felt it to be.

What could his passing question, or her reply, matter to any living being?

"It is not a copy," she replied, following his eye in its perusal of the drawing as she did so; "it is from memory, a small fishing-cove in Gower. I am afraid it is very little like the original."

"In Gower!" Reginald repeated in a tone of infinite amazement.

"Yes," said Alice, smiling at the surprised accent in which he spoke: "I do not wonder at your exclamation, for it is a very out-of-the-world place, abandoned to oyster-fisheries and a few natives. However, it does exist in fact: a sort of peninsula, to the west of Swansea."

"Gower!" Reginald repeated, scarcely hearing what his companion said, and almost gasping for breath in his agitation and surprise; "do you know . . . have you anything to do with Gower?"

It was now Alice's turn to be confused: she again hesitated. It had not occurred to her before, since she quitted England, to be questioned in any way as to her home or parentage; no reference had ever been made to either; she had not arranged any formulæ of reply in the event of her being so. And the present interrogatories admitted of no delay!

Well; perhaps so best. Alice's was an intensely truthful nature. Had she felt it necessary, for any reason, to disguise the truth, the effort would have been a painful one to her; no consideration of its expediency would have reconciled her to doing so. At any rate, she could not, and did not, do so now.

"I have a great deal to do with Gower," she answered simply; "I was born there, and lived there, until some unhappy circumstances compelled me to reside abroad."

Reginald started up from his seat; he could forbear no longer! "Pardon me, Miss Brereton," he said, "if I agitate you in any way; I will not do so more than I can help. But you do not know, you cannot guess, what emotions have been roused in me by what you have just said. Have you . . . have you, . . . pardon me for asking, any relations there?"

The tears started to Alice's eyes as she answered him. "I had once: I ought to say, still have," she said, in a low voice; "my father lives there: Sir Edgar Brereton."

"Your . . . your father!"

Reginald could say no more: in his astonishment, almost dismay, he staggered backward, leaning against a low bookstand in the room for support. Alice, on her part, looked at him with hardly less surprise.

"I am distressed at having troubled you so much by my answer," she said gently, "although I do not understand how I have done so. Do you know anything of Sir Edgar Brereton?"

Reginald made no reply; he was too utterly bewildered. At length he spoke.

"It is due to you," he said, "that I should explain the cause of a behaviour on my part which must seem wholly unaccountable. I think however you will forgive me when I tell you that it was only

a few months since that I became acquainted . . .” the speaker’s lip quivered, but he proceeded . . . “intimately acquainted with a young lady, who was, or I should say, believed herself to be the only child of Sir Edgar Brereton:—who was, and is, his only daughter.”

Alice fixed her eyes on the speaker for a moment with a look in which incredulity mingled with some other feeling; partly indignation, partly alarm. Was he passing some joke upon her; mocking her in her solitude and distress? Was he, could he possibly be, the victim of some delusion in his own mind; a monomaniac; insane?

No. Both suppositions were wholly irreconcilable with the calm, truthful eye, which, in spite of Reginald’s deep trouble, still met hers without flinching. No, indeed.

But there must be some solution of this mystery; let her ascertain what it was forthwith.

“We had better understand each other,” said Alice; “what is the name of the young lady you refer to? The Christian name, I mean?”

“Léonie,” replied Reginald, his lips trembling as they framed the word.

“Léonie!” Alice repeated after him. “She is not Papa’s daughter! I trust,” she added, “that you have been under no anxiety from supposing her to be so.”

“How not his daughter?” asked Reginald in the utmost agitation, placing both hands on the speaker’s arm as he did so; “in compassion and mercy tell me.”

"She is not his child at all," said Alice. "He adopted her, and she always spoke of him as her father, which I conclude has led to your mistake; but she is really the child of a distant cousin of his."

"Thank Heaven! thank Heaven!" Reginald ejaculated. The tears rolled down his cheeks, precluding further utterance; although simultaneously with the relief afforded by this wonderful news, a further thought, connected more immediately with the person who now stood before him, had forced itself upon his mind. But his tongue could not frame it in words; he was too intensely, selfishly happy.

It was Alice herself who at length shaped the question.

"I am glad indeed that my information has caused you such joy," she said. "Probably too, and without pretending to be a diviner, I can guess the reason; at least, if you have known our darling Léonie well, I can easily surmise why the mention of her name should have moved you so deeply. But I am puzzled still. What difference does it make to you, even if if . . . you have loved her, whether she is Sir Edgar Brereton's daughter or not; I mean, why does it make such a profound difference as your emotion seems to indicate?"

Reginald did not answer for a minute or two; his heart was too full even yet. Then he said, in low, almost hushed tones, "Because it is the difference between life and death; between the darkest despair and the brightest hope! Alice, Alice Brere-

ton! listen to me. Your mother, Lady Brereton, had two children. One, whom I ignorantly believed to be Léonie, but whom I now know to be yourself, was born before she quitted your father's roof; quitted, or rather was driven from it by his hard cruelty. The other was born a few months after that event. A son; the person who now speaks to you. Reginald Mansel, under the name he has hitherto borne, but Reginald Brereton in reality. Alice! my own, own sister Alice!"

The voice of nature spoke in both of them too eloquently to leave any doubt. Alice threw herself passionately into her brother's arms, and mingled her tears with his.

And then the long tale of suffering and grief unfolded itself; needless to recapitulate it in this place. Alice insisted first on hearing from Reginald the whole story of Léonie and himself; the attachment which had grown up between them, and the singular manner in which the engagement in which it resulted had been broken off by Lady Brereton's communication. Of the latter Alice enquired again and again. She had been brought up to believe that her mother had died in her own infancy, and that for some reason her name was one which Sir Edgar could not hear mentioned without displeasure; and Hatty Delacombe, at the vicar's suggestion, had always foreborne to enlighten her as to the real facts. Indeed, Hatty herself, like most other persons acquainted with the circumstances, had tacitly assumed that Lady Brereton could no longer be living. Now, on hearing that this was not the

case, Alice pressed Reginald as to a hundred particulars in regard to her; deploring her solitude, her long life of penury and exile from home, as well as the unhappy destiny which had kept mother and daughter apart for so many years.

Reginald satisfied her curiosity as well as he could. But meanwhile he was impatient to hear more of Alice herself:—how was it that she was living abroad, alone, and in this dependent position?

Alice experienced some difficulty in relating her own sad history, even to this newly-found brother. The relief however to her long pent-up feelings was too great to be refused, and she at length disclosed the whole; speaking blushing of her love for Percy Delacombe, and also extenuating as far as possible Sir Edgar's harshness. For the latter, she said, she was unable at the time to assign any reason. In the interval which had since elapsed, however, she had often thought over the matter, and from some expression which Sir Edgar let fall considered it probable that he had either been an eye-witness of the agitating scene between herself and Percy, or had received some information of it from other quarters. In either case, Sir Edgar had doubtless misconstrued Percy's emotion during her swoon, and that which their final parting had occasioned herself, into an avowal of attachment which, under the circumstances, would have justified his severest displeasure.

"I conclude then," Reginald asked when she had completed her narrative, "that Mr. Percy Delacombe, whom, by the way, I have occasionally met in

London, is the boy who is playing on the beach there?" He pointed to Alice's sketch as he spoke.

"Yes," said Alice, blushing again. "Poor Percy! how happy he would have been if he had never known my useless self! By the way, how singular it is that you should both have liked Léonie! It must all have been broken off between them, I suppose, before you met her at Swanage?"

"Unquestionably," said Reginald; "she never referred to it in any way, but she doubtless would have done so had we been longer together: our engaged time was very short."

"Poor Percy!" Alice said again, with a sigh which she could not repress: "I wonder if he would know me now, so altered as I am. But we shall never meet again in this world."

"You must not speak so despondingly, dearest Alice," said Reginald, who at the same time secretly registered a vow that if Percy were in England he should be at once sent for, "You have been holding your own the last few weeks, or nearly so; Italy would do wonders, if we could only move you there."

Alice shook her head. "Even if I could disguise the truth from my own heart," she said, "my thin hands and cheeks would make me own it. But, Reginald, I am selfish in speaking so much of myself, in detaining you here a half-hour longer. You must at once go to dear Léonie and tell her what has happened; let her share your joy. It more than compensates any suffering I have undergone to think that it has been the means of removing the strange mistake which was separating you."

"Léonie shall hear the joyful news forthwith," said Reginald, whose impatience had hardly allowed Alice to finish her sentence; "but not from my lips. I shall not leave the sister I have just found, Alice; not until she is much better, at all events. Better," he added, as a sudden thought occurred to him, "and able to resume her place at her own house. Alice, do you know what has occurred?"

The tone in which he spoke at once arrested Alice's attention, while at the same time it guided her thoughts in the same direction as those of the speaker. "My father?" she asked.

"Yes: you had better be told of it; I was thinking how I could break it to you just now. Have you heard nothing about him?"

"Nothing," said Alice. "I have been wholly out of the way of English news; purposely so, in fact."

"I saw nothing but Galignani," said Reginald, "and that only by accident: it was some months ago now. He is dead, Alice; died very terribly. He took poison!"

They both maintained an awe-struck silence for some minutes. Then Reginald resumed.

"No details were given," he said, "but I fear there is no doubt that it was so. I at once wrote to my mother, urging her not to disclose the fact of my existence. Something which she let fall a few years since made me fancy that she might do so in the event which has now occurred; and as matters then stood, or as I believed them to stand, between Léonie and myself, it was misery even to think of this happening. I have had some letters from her

combating my decision; but as she found that it was useless to do so, she acquiesced, and so the matter stands. One or two advertisements for my father's heir, if any, have appeared in reference to some technical proceedings arising out of his death, but to these of course I have not replied."

"But you will assume the title now?" asked Alice.

"I suppose so," Reginald answered; "but this will be for after consideration; at present this joy leaves me no time or heart to think about it. I shall be entirely governed by dear Léonie's wishes;—if I ever do see her again, that is."

"Would that you would go to her at once," Alice still urged. And for some time she continued to press her request.

Reginald however was firm in refusing compliance, and as Alice was fatigued with the excitement of their conversation, he took his leave, promising to return early on the following day.

Both at Partenkirch and Garmisch he now announced himself as her brother; giving such an outline of the events which had happened to separate them, and of the accidental discovery of the fact which had that day taken place, as, in conjunction with the marked likeness between the two, abundantly satisfied those to whom it was addressed.

CHAPTER XXI.

It was fortunate that Reginald had been so decided in refusing to quit Partenkirch.

On the night succeeding his last important conversation with Alice, the weather underwent one of those sudden changes which are frequent in mountainous countries, but which on this occasion extended, although with less marked severity, over the whole of the Continent. A bitter north wind set in; and when Reginald awoke the following morning the hills and even the roofs in the village were covered with snow.

He was still dressing when there was a summons at the door of his room. A message from Partenkirch. The young lady had been taken most dangerously ill during the night; she was unable to write, but wished him sent for.

Reginald proceeded with all haste to the Three Kings, and found that the statement was in no degree exaggerated. The sudden cold, coupled with the agitation of the preceding day, had brought on an alarming increase of Alice's disorder; her cough had been violent throughout the night, and in one of the paroxysms a vessel had been ruptured. The bleeding from this was checked, but it might recur at any time; for the present she must have perfect quietude, and be sedulously watched; this was the medical report. Reginald, on hearing it, at once assumed his post by her bedside.

Four days, during which Alice hovered between life and death.

Hardly that, indeed, for she was now sinking, in any event. Sinking rapidly; the decline, so long retarded in its progress, had now set in with proportionate violence, and it was palpable, even to an unpractised eye, that the end could not be far distant. Still, on these days, it might have arrived at any moment.

On the fifth morning, there was some improvement; no pause in the real progress of the malady, but more ease to Alice herself. She was able to take nourishment; to talk without undue effort, and even cheerfully. Later in the day, she expressed a wish to sit up; not in the downstairs room, but at the window of her own, which commanded an exquisite view. And this was not prohibited. The doctor shrugged his shoulders, not unfeelingly, but still with palpable meaning, when Reginald asked permission for this. "What she will," he said, "what she will; it signifies nothing."

Alice was sitting up, when one of the clattering post-carriages of the district drove at a rapid pace under the gateway of the Three Kings. Reginald hastened downstairs to meet it. He had written to Percy Delacombe on the evening of the *éclaircissement* which had taken place between himself and Alice, and was not without hope, short as the time had been, that his correspondent might have been able to reach Partenkirch.

And Reginald's hope was verified. As the vehicle drove up to the door of the hotel Percy

stepped out of it, the two young men at once recognising each other. Reginald had written direct to Trecoed, and in his own name, giving a brief summary of what had occurred; and Percy, who had returned to England some months before, and was fortunately at home when the letter arrived, started for the Continent immediately on receiving it.

Meanwhile, Percy had to be prepared for the alarming change which the last few days had wrought in Alice; a task which Reginald discharged with the deepest sympathy for the added suffering he was thus inflicting. He then requested Percy to wait below while he broke the news of his arrival to Alice. He had not mentioned his intention to the latter, fearing that Percy might not be in England; now, with this rapid increase of her complaint, he almost regretted that he had written at all. Better almost that they should not have met again, than to do so for the few brief days—it might be hours even—for which only Alice's life could now apparently be prolonged. However, it was too late now.

Alice was deeply moved. "Let him come up," she said, "it may give him some comfort. Poor Percy, I have been very cruel to him, although I did not mean to be. I need his forgiveness!"

They sate together in the small room. A fire burnt on the hearth: the apartment possessing that speciality, as now and then some old-fashioned inn on the Continent does possess it, in lieu of the

cheerless stove. And it was bitter weather enough out-of-doors for them to appreciate the comfort.

Bright enough, although bitter; Alice remained for some time at the window where she had placed herself on first rising, and where she could see the sun as it dipped westward, lighting up mountain-summit and cloud-pinnacle with its radiance.

Then she had her couch moved nearer the fire, and reclined upon it, propped with pillows; Percy and Reginald sate by her. The latter more than once withdrew from the room, wishing to leave his companions to themselves; but Alice called him back. "We have no secrets now," she said. "Percy and I love each other very dearly, but that is soon told, as much as it ever can be told here: life is not long enough for love, for real love; one's heart and brain are so crowded with selfish fancies. I have one which is disturbing me now," Alice added after a pause; "I hope it is not wrong."

"It cannot be that, dearest," said Percy.

"I do not know," she said; "if your father were here he might be vexed for such a thing being in my thoughts at this moment. He always called me a weird girl, you know."

"And what is the weird idea now, Alice?" Percy asked.

"A very strange one: it has more to do with Reginald here, with him and dear Léonie, than ourselves. You know what dark crime there has been in our family; a haunting spirit, as the people round us believe, which for this century past has led us on, one after the other, to guilt and suffer-

ing? Reginald knows nothing about this, how should he? but you do, Percy; you know the old story?"

"I understand what you refer to, at all events," said Percy. "But what have you to do with this, dearest; you whose whole life has been one of devoted goodness?"

Alice shuddered. "Oh! Percy," she cried, "if you could only read me as I read myself; if you could only see that life spread out in its reality before me, as I now see it! But no; I am thankful you cannot; you would loathe and spurn me from you! But the death may do what the worthless life never could: it may *expiate*. All through my growing-up, ever since I was told that story of our inherited guilt, I have shuddered to think that it might devolve upon myself; that some dark tragedy might occur, in which I might be the unhappy actor; some violence or bloodshed, the result of unbridled passion, to lie at my door. Thank Heaven for me that I have been at least spared this, Percy dear. That I have been the victim, not the wilful agent. That my innocent death,—for you know, Percy, I was innocent,—may have paid the penalty; satisfied the forfeit, as far as it attached to the descendants of those who incurred it, of that heavy first guilt."

Percy's tears fell fast; he could not answer the speaker. She continued, after a minute's pause.

"I have been talking very wildly," she said; "and rambling, I am afraid you will think. Although it is not rambling really; neither of you can

understand how strong a feeling this has been with me all my life, still less, the hold which this fancy has taken of me at present. But I am not going to speak any more of that: I ought to speak of nothing on earth now but you, Percy; you, and my new brother here. Percy, do you remember . . . no, of course I have learnt it since then; I thought it was one of the pieces I used to say to you when we were children together, and when you thought me so poetry-dazed, but it is a much later one. Do you know it, Reginald;—you are the authority in literary matters now;—‘The date on the garden-seat’?”

“Not by that name, Alice dear,” said Reginald.

“‘The date on the garden-seat; an adult lullaby for the sleepless,’ it is called,” said Alice. “A curious name, is it not, and a curious piece, but something reminded me of it just this minute; I should like to repeat it to you. The date, you know, is supposed to be written in the way one sees sometimes, with a number for the month instead of its proper name, and the year put short.

I.

“ ‘9/9/’29,’ one, two, three;
 ‘9/9/’29,’ under the willow-tree;
 ‘9/9/’29,’ merry hearts were we
 In that old year ’29, by that old garden tree!

II.

4/11/’37, as leaves from the tree,
 As flowers in the bright summer hours, faded one of three;
 In her greenness and her springtide, in her young heart of glee,
 She faded; aye, she died, my pride, my sister Rosalie!

III.

'41/;—and, ere 'twas done on some rude sea
 Had sunk my boy-brother, the bold heart of the three;
 In dead night, or at matins, as we sang the Litany,
 The sail was riven, the hull driven;—and there slept he!

IV.

'9/9/'29,' and now '63;
 And my turn in the lottery urn, ah! when shall it be?—
 I have wailed that heart's wailing, I have borne earth's agony,
 And now the old, old number has a new song for me.

V.

'9/9/'29,' back to the willow-tree;
 '9/9/'29,' back, for we still are three;
 Back, but where no partings are, nor storm, nor sea;
 Back to the home that fadeth not, fair heaven, in thee!"

Alice was tired, and felt chilled, by the time she had come to the end of her piece.

"I will lie down in bed again now," she said; "you can both come up again in half-an-hour, and if I am asleep you will be delivered from my chattering for a short time. I am a most garrulous invalid."

She was asleep when they returned: dozing peacefully, at first. But the slumber was soon broken. Alice started up uneasily, and looked round her, restless and feverish; a few minutes afterwards, the cough which had so nearly proved fatal before returned upon her with increased violence.

This continued for some hours; Percy and Reginald both sitting by the bedside, and dreading every moment what they might next witness.

But the end did not come in the way they feared; with that terrible bleeding.

The cough at length ceased from sheer exhaustion, the return of strength which Alice had shown

during the day serving as the prelude to its final overthrow. She dozed on during the night, and up to an early hour the next morning: then she woke, just as objects became visible in the grey light.

She was very feeble now; not suffering in any way, but too feeble to be lifted in bed, or even to speak, excepting a few hardly audible words. Percy sat by her, trying to catch these. From time to time he moistened her lips with some liquid which stood by the bedside; whenever he did this, she repaid him by a sweet, almost bright smile. When not thus occupied, he held one of her hands in both his own, the warm grasp of which she occasionally returned by a slight pressure.

By-and-bye, he felt the pressure increase; Alice evidently wanted something.

Reginald?

Yes. Finding she was understood, Alice feebly signed for him to come round to the further side of the bed, raising her other hand above the coverlid at the same time. She wished him to take it.

Then a slight shudder ran through her frame, and all was over. Reginald and Percy knelt by the bedside, each still retaining the hand he held; the former, as Alice had previously requested him to do at the last, read aloud the commendatory prayer from the English Church office.

But the spirit had passed beyond hearing of it. Still, in its tenacious love for others, holding on by those two links of union to the life which for itself had been so barren of happiness. But now incapable of longer retention, even by, and for them!

CHAPTER XXII.

IN the interval between Alice's death and interment some important conversation passed between her brother and Percy Delacombe in regard to Léonie. Reginald had written to the latter by the same post which had conveyed his message to Percy, and was beginning to feel not a little anxiety at his having received no reply as yet.

This feeling was augmented by the information which Percy, to whom he communicated the circumstances of his engagement to Léonie, and of the erroneous belief which had broken it off, now gave him in regard to matters at Ceniarth.

On Sir Edgar's death, the misconception under which he had acted in regard to Alice and which had been attended with such disastrous results, had become matter of general notoriety, the deceased baronet's letter to Lady Brereton having been of course produced at the inquest. In Percy's own mind, as well as in that of every one acquainted with the family relations, a further and most painful subject of speculation had been how such a mistake could have arisen. He was wholly unconscious of any third person having been a spectator of the agitating scene between himself and Alice; and yet it was impossible to account for Sir Edgar's belief on any supposition excepting that of his having himself seen what passed, or received information of it from some other quarter. That Sir Edgar

should have been an eye-witness on the occasion, however, seemed most unlikely. Had this been so, he would have interposed at once; it was wholly inconsistent with his character to suppose otherwise: besides, the wording of the letter to Lady Brereton clearly pointed to a knowledge of facts derived from some other person.

Who then was this?

In some vague manner, Percy's suspicions, as Léonie's had done, came eventually to fix themselves upon Mrs. Ponsonby; unintelligible as her object was for acting in this manner, there was no one else who could be thought to have had any motive at all. And motive of some kind there must have been; simple mistake was impossible.

This being so, it was not without uneasiness, in which Hatty Delacombe fully shared, that Percy, on his return from his cruise, heard of Léonie having accompanied Mrs. Ponsonby to the Continent. There was no definite ground for apprehension; nothing, as it appeared, to connect Mrs. Ponsonby's malpractice in the former matter, even supposing this were established, with any covert design in regard to Léonie; still less to impute any such to her at present. On the contrary, her place of residence abroad for the time being, was, as Hatty had ascertained, always known at Ceniarth, and letters forwarded to it from thence.

Still, there was some uncomfortable feeling in regard to this matter of which the brother and sister at Trecoed vicarage found it impossible to divest themselves; and which Reginald, although

knowing nothing of Mrs. Ponsonby beyond what Percy had told him, entertained still more strongly. Unless his letter to Léonie had miscarried, which was unlikely, he ought to have heard from her long since. He had gone into the fullest details, explaining how the error had arisen on his own part, and entreating Léonie's pardon for the suffering this had unavoidably caused her, as well as an immediate renewal of their engagement; and it was inconceivable that she should not at once have replied to this. There might have been some accidental delay, of course; still, Reginald was disquieted, and determined to lose no time in ascertaining in person how matters stood.

As soon as the interment was over, which took place at Partenkirch, and, according to local regulations, at a somewhat earlier date than would have been the case in England, Reginald accordingly set out; Percy remaining behind to superintend the erection of a stone cross which they had decided to place over Alice's grave. Reginald's destination was Paris. A telegram had been received from Hatty meanwhile, stating that Mrs. Ponsonby was at present resident in that capital; and her address there, which the Ceniarth servants at once supplied, was also given.

While he is on his way, the progress of events in the interval as regarded Léonie and her companions must be narrated. The alastor had still its ultimate penalty to exact!

In inviting Léonie to accompany her to the Continent, Mrs. Ponsonby's primary motive had been

plain and natural enough. She was desirous of reaping some fruits from the tortuous policy she had been pursuing, and which had involved so much more, both in the way of doing and suffering, than she had at all calculated upon in the first instance. Impossible, after going through what she had, now to sacrifice the whole results!

But this she must be prepared to do, if Léonie remained at home. Mrs. Ponsonby, of course, knew nothing of the Swanage episode. But it was obvious, with Léonie's position and beauty, that she would have no lack of admirers; now that Alice was out of the way, Percy Delacombe himself might reappear, for that matter. Unless the whole past were to be forfeited, therefore, Stephen must try his chance; and here was the opportunity for his doing so.

As to Stephen himself, he caught eagerly at the prospect which Mrs. Ponsonby now held out to him. Time had dimmed the memory of his miscarriages with Léonie, while it had, if anything, augmented the ardour of his feelings towards her. Even these discomfitures, he reflected, had been of a negative rather than a positive character; they had lain in his want of progress, more than in any actual rebuff. Given fresh scenes, opportunities of furthering her wishes, engaging her interests and tastes in some new sphere, and he did not yet despair of success.

Accordingly, when Mrs. Ponsonby set out with Léonie for the Continent, Stephen made his arrangements for joining them; this, as we have stated elsewhere, was a few weeks after Sir Edgar's death,

and some eight or nine months before the date to which our story has now reached.

In the first instance Stephen only put in an appearance as an occasional visitor, returning to London for his business. Mrs. Ponsonby, to facilitate this, had suggested Paris for their residence; and Léonie, who in her desolation and grief felt that all places were alike, interposed no objection. At Paris, with the exception of a short visit to Pau in the course of the summer, they had accordingly been located during the interval; returning to the former place early in the present September.

Not, however, returning to the house which they had at first occupied, and which was in a street adjoining the Champs Elysées. Their present apartments were on the outskirts of the capital, towards the Bois de Boulogne; a pleasant situation in itself, but retired and almost lonely, the house standing detached in a small walled enclosure. This alteration was the result of choice on Mrs. Ponsonby's part, and had not been made without sufficient reason.

The fact is, that in requesting Léonie to accompany her, the prosecution of Stephen's suit was the superficial object only. It was the one of which Stephen was to be made cognisant, and of which he was cognisant accordingly; but there was another and a far more powerful one, which, far from avowing it to her son, Mrs. Ponsonby hardly cared to entertain even in the recesses of her own breast.

For some year or two at least Mrs. Ponsonby did not care that Léonie should be far out of her own sight and hearing! There was a circumstance in

connection with the late tragedy at Ceniarth which made it desirable that she should not be. Léonie, and Léonie alone, of all the household there, knew that on the night which had witnessed Sir Edgar's death, the coffee which had been the vehicle of the poison had been, for some minute or two before it was taken to the library, at Mrs. Ponsonby's unobserved and uncontrolled disposal: for this brief space of time Léonie had herself been out of the drawing-room, and no one else had been there.

Léonie had expressed no suspicion in connection with this. She in fact entertained none. The vague idea which, in the first shock of Sir Edgar's death, had floated through her mind, had not associated itself with this circumstance. It had not had time to; the presumption of suicide was so overpowering and so universally accepted, that the surmise itself disappeared almost as soon as it was formed.

Still, although things were thus satisfactory in the present, they might not continue so. Had Léonie resided within reach of those who were acquainted with the melancholy circumstances, their mention might any day have occurred; the subject been discussed, and possibly this latent train of thought suggested. Far safer that she should be under Mrs. Ponsonby's own eye, removed from all risk and accident of the kind!

At all events, for some time to come. By-and-bye, Sir Edgar's death would take its place among the incidents of the past, and the risk apprehended, if any, would practically cease to exist.

All very well this in theory.

But Mrs. Ponsonby had overlooked one element in the calculation; the action of her own mind and conscience. The practical result was wholly different to what she had anticipated.

Far from giving any feeling of security, Léonie's daily presence in the house as the depository of this perilous secret began to exert an extraordinary influence over her. It mesmerised her, so to speak!

Mrs. Ponsonby began to find her own movements obeying those of an external volition. Where Léonie went, she must go; where Léonie looked, she must look. In the intense, absorbing fear in which her existence identified itself with that of the person she was watching, Mrs. Ponsonby detected herself at times almost reproducing the latter; copying, involuntarily, its speech, its details of gait and gesture!

Such was the Nemesis which Mrs. Ponsonby had now created for herself! Borne it across her threshold, planted it beside her in hearth and home: a presence, fascinating in the degree in which it was terrifying; one at which she trembled, and yet which she dared not put away from her! Impossible now, with this guest beside her, the life-enjoyment, the amusement she had promised herself in going abroad; the mere thought of them sickened her! Even her half-plot with Stephen, its prospects, its results, were all thrust out of sight and memory now!

Hence too Mrs. Ponsonby's choice of the secluded residence which she now occupied. The more secluded the better for her secret! She had a kind of feeling

that all eyes were upon it; that they saw in Léonie all that she did; read in her the custodian of a fact of such fatal import. Let her bury it out of sight, as deeply and as remotely as she could!

And then by degrees, this feeling developed itself: produced a species of secondary growth. A new idea struck Mrs. Ponsonby; one of which, in the earlier stages of this forced companionship with the person whom she feared so much, she had been wholly innocent. Was there not something better than such companionship; more secure, more easy, more complete; something which, if she could only see her way to it, might extinguish the fear altogether, finally, absolutely? How if the brain were to lose the memory of what it thus knew, the tongue become powerless to speak it, the hand to write it?

Such was the thought which now, at odd times, flashed into Mrs. Ponsonby's mind. She did not summon it there, did not even entertain it, in express terms, when it came; she shrunk from it, quite as much as if it had been her first act of crime; probably, as far as the mere sensations of repugnance went, even more. It is of the very essence of crime that this should be the case. The act itself becomes easier of performance on each occasion, but in the same proportion its attendant pain becomes greater. Mrs. Ponsonby would have escaped this further matter if she could.

But she could not. Recoil from it as she might, the thought came and went without her volition: shaped itself, methodised, combined; pointed out the time, the place, the implement!

Not in the way of express design, at present, but as vague possibilities; arranging themselves, like objects seen in a walking dream, into an imagery distorted and uncouth, but not wholly outside the range of fact.

It is under such conditions as these that the fatal result is often precipitated; circumstance decides the question for us, not ourselves. Something unforeseen happens; the rudder is struck from our grasp; a sterner helmsman seizes it; unresisting, and powerless if we did resist, we ride on to the foreseen doom!

Stephen Ponsonby's suit still by no means progressed.

No progress during the earlier period of their continental sojourn, when he joined Mrs. Ponsonby and Léonie only at intervals. Léonie tolerated him; perhaps did rather more. She felt some relief in his being there; accepted such services as he tendered, and as she had the heart or inclination to avail herself of, with a courteous acknowledgment of their presumed goodwill in being offered; but that was all. No advance beyond this point, even then.

And now, since their return from Pau, still less.

On this second settlement in Paris, Stephen had established himself en permanence in the house occupied by Mrs. Ponsonby, hoping perhaps to further matters with Léonie thereby. But if this was the intention, it signally failed; the result was directly the reverse. Seeing more of him, Léonie saw him more frequently out of disguise; saw the hardness,

the craft, the avarice, the selfishness of the man; all, which in their previous acquaintance he had contrived to mask from her. She wondered now that her feelings to him had been even those of toleration!

And Léonie now too made a still further discovery. Began to divine, impossible as it seemed that he should have even thought of such a thing, something of the purpose with which he was bestowing so much of his society upon them. Her grief and repugnance when this fact did clearly manifest itself to her knew no bounds; the thought was intolerable! She shrunk from him; shrunk from his speech, his presence: he saw that she did so.

And yet, he persisted. Had his affections, or whatever stood in their place, been less interested, the matter would have been simple. Palpable that as a pecuniary speculation, the scheme in which he was embarked was hopeless; that he had much better have held by the County Court practice and small conveyancing which, in an evil hour, he had thrown up for the prosecution of it! This is what the reasonable side of Stephen's nature would have taught him. But when his passions became enlisted they overbore all remonstrance of the kind. Twice at least in the twenty-four hours he went through the Shakespearian purgatory, the ice and the fire. A love which was half hatred. An irritation, fanned indeed by the loss of his professional prospects, as well as by a somewhat new habit of drinking to excess which he had contracted, but in which the main element was persistent love!

At length a crisis came.

Stephen had been indulging rather more deeply than usual, and, in this condition, presented himself before Léonie. She was working, with some pretence of a book before her, in the drawing-room of their present residence; her thoughts far distant, recurring, as they incessantly did, to those golden hours at Swanage; that noontide of joy; that evening, so overcast, so hopelessly, so unaccountably. Certainly not a congenial mood for Stephen's advances!

He made them, notwithstanding.

Léonie was no baby, and saw on Stephen's entering the room that he had taken more than was good for him. She made no remark however, and did not think it necessary to leave him. The thing had occurred before, but the man had been endurable enough; somewhat heavier than usual, but nothing beyond this.

When however Stephen, under the inspiration of his present potations, advanced for the first time so far as to become overtly demonstrative, Léonie's self-command gave way. He gradually edged his chair nearer to hers; discoursed, with a somewhat thick utterance, on various general topics; then passed from these into some personalities of which Léonie could make nothing, excepting that they sounded rather impertinent. Finally, by an unexpected movement, he possessed himself of her hand and raised it to his lips.

Léonie started from her seat like a Pythoness in the Delphic adytum. Never in her life had such a disgrace overtaken her; so profound, so intolerable!

The whole vehemence of her nature, checked and subdued as it had been by recent occurrences, seemed to exert itself now, as nature sometimes does in rebellion against even formed character, in its full force.

"Mr. Ponsonby! man!" she exclaimed, "what does this mean? How do you dare to do this; to take advantage of your legal position as my guardian; I suppose you know pretty well that there is no other relation between us? You coward! you mean, dastardly coward! Leave me, sir; leave me immediately!"

Stephen attempted some exculpation; quite uselessly, but the interval gave Léonie time to recover from the first violence of her wrath.

"Mr. Ponsonby," she said, "your present condition is so palpable that I ought not to have degraded myself by wasting words upon you. As you do not think fit to quit the room, I shall do so myself, and quit the house also to-morrow morning; you will have the goodness to tell your mother this. How far what has now passed has been with her connivance, I do not know; I suspect it has. And it is not the only or the worst suspicion I have about her. I shall hold no further intercourse with either of you."

Léonie withdrew to her own apartment as she said this, leaving Stephen to digest his rebuff as he best might.

He was greatly irritated; sobered in actual faculties by what had occurred, but in a mood of fierce passion, which he vented in oaths and even men-

aces against Léonie, although long since out of hearing. Finding small satisfaction in this, he hastened to vent it elsewhere; on Mrs. Ponsonby.

"Flouted by a girl like that!" Stephen exclaimed, after detailing what had passed; "flouted to my face! Actually not a civil word to say to me; threatening to fly from me, and from the house, as if I had brought a pestilence into it! I hate her! What right has she to treat an honest man's suit in this way? And it is entirely your fault," he continued, turning angrily on Mrs. Ponsonby; "why did you bring me here on this fool's errand? Could you not have known what the girl was like? Here are time, money, business, all sacrificed, and for what? Only that she may have the satisfaction of spurning me from her, trampling me like the mire under her feet! Much we have gained by all your plotting and scheming!"

The charge was certainly hard against Mrs. Ponsonby, and under other circumstances she would not have been slow to recriminate. But she was transfixed by too lively a terror at present; her whole attention absorbed by one sentence in what she had just heard. Ignoring Stephen's attack upon herself, she recurred to this.

"She speaks of quitting the house?" she asked falteringly.

"Yes," said Stephen; "did you not hear me say so? she intends leaving to-morrow. And, by the way, she will have some pleasant little stories against you, apparently; I had forgotten that; she says that she suspects you of something or other worse than

even allowing me to make love to her. I don't know what she means; I suppose you do."

The emergency was critical; life and death, as Mrs. Ponsonby felt.

Léonie to leave, escape from her surveillance, carry abroad into the world with her her fatal knowledge; still more fatal, in connection with the suspicion she had just avowed to Stephen! Intolerable! It contradicted what for months past had been the one dominant idea in Mrs. Ponsonby's mind!

But she rose to the emergency; shaped her course at once. So rapidly, that the mental deliberation which took place in regard to it hardly occupied an appreciable point of time.

Léonie must not leave; she must be stopped; stopped and silenced;—*for all time*. The means which for so long past had been suggesting themselves now stood forward, sharp and tangible to eye and hand; there they were, quite easy, quite certain. Only one thing further needed; Stephen's acquiescence, or non-interference rather. This must be secured; he must be plotted against as well as Léonie; his love, such as it was, made the tool for her purposes! And this Mrs. Ponsonby proceeded to do.

She banished from her face every trace of the anxiety which beset her, as well as any indications of displeasure at Stephen's rudeness. "Really and truly," she said, replying with hardly a moment's pause to his last words, "I do not know what Léonie means; what suspicions she entertains. If she has any, she is quite welcome to them. I am sure too,

as far as I am concerned, she is quite welcome to leave immediately; I should feel it a relief; she has become very triste during the last year or two, wholly altered from what she used to be. The only thing to be considered is whether you choose to permit it."

"Why, how can I help it?" asked Stephen doggedly; although in the revulsion of his feelings he had already begun to repent of his resentment against Léonie, and, in the same proportion, to look forward with dismay to the prospect of so speedily losing her.

"How can I help it?" he repeated, as Mrs. Ponsonby did not at once reply.

"Quite easily," she answered at length. "Easily, with my assistance, that is; and if you really wish her to remain here, you shall have it: you were rather unfair to me just now, but I will not bear malice."

"But what can you do?" asked Stephen.

"Not much to be done after all," said his mother, "only you need me for it. Simply a key turned in a door, and a few words of explanation to the people downstairs. You know that they are total strangers to us."

"But what will be the use of detaining her?" Stephen asked again; "she will have nothing to say to me."

"I think otherwise," said Mrs. Ponsonby; "caged birds become tractable and humble enough sometimes. And in this case," she added in a low but significant tone, "and with the advantages at com-

mand, I should suppose that the extent to which the humbling is carried would depend pretty much upon yourself."

Stephen looked up and tried to catch the speaker's eye, but could not do so. Mrs. Ponsonby looked aside. Even in that supreme moment her character retained one truth; its shame of womanhood!

But there was no need for their eyes to meet.

Stephen's base nature, incapable of the love it had simulated, depraved still further at present by the drink he had swallowed, as well as by the irritation still lurking in his mind from Léonie's recent reception of him, caught greedily at the devil's bait. Without word, without sign, in the muteness of a reciprocated guilt, the compact was sealed between them; finally; unalterably!

Sealed, that is, as far as Stephen's share in it went: Mrs. Ponsonby was to be left to act as she judged best. But Mrs. Ponsonby herself, as already intimated, had other and deeper purposes in the transaction; purposes of which Stephen surmised nothing.

Not such indeed as pressed for immediate execution. She still shrunk from this; still craved, as it were, from the stronger compulsion which actuated her, a brief further respite. But such as, when this interval was past, must in any event be executed; and, should need arise, might require to be executed with very little interval at all!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE bedroom which Léonie occupied, and to which she had retired on leaving Stephen, opened out of a dining salle, fitted, as usual, with a large stove for burning charcoal. The two apartments were at some distance from the rest of the house, and Léonie had selected her own room, although a small one, on this account; it had one window, overlooking an inclosed garden in the rear of the building, and, from its nearness to the ground, protected, as were those of the salle itself, by iron bars.

The door of communication between the two rooms locked from the outside. In Léonie's own room there was a bolt, but it had no hasp; although Léonie, in her total unsuspicion of design against herself, had never felt any necessity for making it secure.

Mrs. Ponsonby, however, was less negligent.

On parting from Stephen she at once hastened to the saloon and arranged matters there. Simply enough. "The key" of which she had spoken to Stephen, was turned; the bolt shot forward; and Léonie, who in her pre-occupation had not heard the slight sound which accompanied it, was incarcerated as a prisoner!

Mrs. Ponsonby put the key in her pocket, and then proceeded to the proprietress of the house; an infirm person, somewhat advanced in life, and who, with one daughter and a hard-working bonne from

the south of France, were the only inmates besides the lodgers.

To this lady Mrs. Ponsonby communicated, with an air of uneasiness, that she was at present under a good deal of apprehension in regard to her niece; the name by which Léonie had usually passed during their residence abroad. "She was subject to fits," Mrs. Ponsonby said, "which, although not serious in themselves, greatly weakened her. Weakened her for the time being in mind," Mrs. Ponsonby intimated, "even more than in body; under the influence of these, in fact, she was not herself, and some mild form of restraint was necessary. At present, Mrs. Ponsonby regretted to say, there were indications that one of these attacks was imminent. To prevent her niece injuring herself or others, she had secured the door on the outside, any precaution in regard to the window being fortunately rendered unnecessary by the bars to the latter. All that would be required further would be that if Madame Joubert would kindly permit it, Mrs. Ponsonby might have a temporary bed made up on one of the couches in the dining saloon: she would then be in a position to attend to her niece in any way which might be requisite. The attacks seldom lasted more than a few days, and then her relative would be entirely herself again. During the progress of the one which they were now anticipating, it might be as well if Madame Joubert would caution her daughter and the domestic not to be terrified by any outcry they might hear; it was unhappily part of the malady. Mrs. Ponsonby then again apo-

logised for the trouble she was giving, as well as for the unfortunate circumstance of such an illness taking place in the apartments, although she trusted no serious inconvenience would result; the bed in the saloon, she added, it would be desirable to have arranged as early as possible. She would herself do whatever was necessary in her niece's room, and take her in her meals."

All which was adjusted accordingly.

Madame Joubert received with total unsuspicion the statements of a lodger who paid such a high rent, and paid it so regularly, as Mrs. Ponsonby. And as her own daughter was mainly occupied in attendance upon herself, and the *bonne*, besides having the work of the house upon her, had the superstitious fear usually felt by the lower orders, abroad as well as in England, for any form of mental disorder, Mrs. Ponsonby, in the course of half-an-hour, had the management of her prisoner under her own absolute and unobserved control!

It was not until the usual dinner-hour approached that Léonie discovered what had happened.

Overcome with grief and resentment at the persecution to which she had been subjected, she had, on withdrawing to her room, sat for some time absorbed in painful thought. Then she roused herself, and began to make some necessary preparations for quitting Paris on the following day, as well to consider the question of the residence it would be best for her to select, now that her remaining under Mrs. Ponsonby's charge was rendered impossible. Hearing some movement in the adjoining *salle*, and conclud-

ing that the cloth was being laid there for dinner as usual, she went to the door of her own room, intending to request that some bread and wine might be sent her there; she was resolved not to meet either Mrs. Ponsonby or her son again.

On discovering, as she speedily did, that the door of communication was locked on the outside, Léonie's indignation knew no bounds. She did not however, after the first exclamation of surprise, utter any call for assistance, such as Mrs. Ponsonby had anticipated; she seemed at once to realise the hopelessness of doing so. An examination of the window, which Léonie instantly made, showed her that no escape was practicable in that direction; she was in close custody! In her grief and resentment at this discovery, Léonie threw herself on the bed and wept silently and very bitterly.

After the lapse of half-an-hour, Mrs. Ponsonby entered the outer apartment, and spoke to her. "I bring you food," she said; "let me hear that you withdraw to the further end of your room, and I will place it within your reach."

Léonie instantly dried her tears, and sprung up from the bed. "I refuse it," she cried passionately: "I will not touch food, I will not speak to you or answer you until you release me. Do your worst, starve me here, if you will; I defy you. There will be a retribution for this, as well as for the other crimes of which I am now convinced you have been guilty!"

Mrs. Ponsonby attempted some persuasion, but ineffectually; Léonie adhered to her purpose, making

no further reply of any kind. At length Mrs. Ponsonby desisted; and, after arranging the dishes she had brought so as to make it appear that Léonie had partaken of a meal, placed them on a buffet in the passage by which the other portion of the house communicated with the saloon, and returned to the latter.

Here she remained in considerable perplexity. Léonie's refusal to taste food had created a difficulty which she had not foreseen, and which she hardly knew how to deal with. It might precipitate matters; compel her to act; to effectuate at an earlier period the plan which she had already looked forward to in the ultimate resort. Undesirable this, on all accounts; but there seemed no remedy.

Hour after hour she sat pondering over the position, but without arriving at any definite result. It had fallen dark long since, but Mrs. Ponsonby had not lighted candles; they stood on a side-table, but she had been too much absorbed in thought to rise for the purpose of doing so; conscious of the necessity of her arriving at some decision, but yet shrinking, in spite of the past, from the only decision which seemed practicable.

The solution of the problem came at last in an unexpected shape. She was still seated, brooding over these perplexities, when there was a knock at the door, and the servant of the house entered. Mrs. Ponsonby had taken care to be supplied with everything which she would require for the evening, and was surprised at her appearance. The girl, who was frightened herself, and eager to escape from such

near proximity to the dreaded malady, placed on the table a letter which had just come by post, and then withdrew.

A letter with the Swansea post-mark; re-addressed to Léonie in the handwriting of the housekeeper left in charge at Ceniarth. The previous address, also to Léonie, but in a wholly strange handwriting. On the reverse side, two Bavarian post-marks; Munich, and some other place which was illegible.

Mrs. Ponsonby looked at this document with some uneasiness; what did its appearance there portend at that moment?

The circumstances however did not admit of delay; let her examine the contents and judge for herself. Small risk in doing that after the hazard she was incurring in other ways! She broke the seal, and read.

Reginald's letter; written from Garmisch on the evening of his eventful conversation with Alice. Full of passionate, burning words of love. Telling her the whole story of what had occurred; his own parentage; the singular mistake under which he had lain as to hers; the agony with which he tore himself from her; the joy with which he looked forward to their re-union! Telling her, interjectionally with this in the writer's eager haste, that Alice still lived, although struck with mortal illness; that he had sent for Percy, and should remain at Partenkirch until the arrival of the latter, at all events; perhaps until the end, which could not now be far distant. Asking Léonie's approval of his doing so, impatient as he

was to see her again. Imploring her to write to him immediately in reply.

Such was the epistle which Mrs. Ponsonby, with an astonishment only exceeded by the overpowering apprehension which it aroused in her, perused from beginning to end. Alice's brother, Sir Reginald Brereton, as he would now be, engaged to Léonie! certain to follow his own letter in person at the earliest moment; probably, with the delay which had taken place in its transmission, already on his way! ascertaining their Paris address, possibly even now in Paris, in quest of Léonie! finding her a prisoner here; hearing from her the story of her incarceration, the story of those former matters of which she now entertained so much more than mere suspicion; which she had not scrupled, already twice that day, to charge to Mrs. Ponsonby almost in express terms! All this to happen!

It must not be. There was one mode of averting it; the refuge to which she had looked forward under the anxiety of all these past weeks. A safe and easy refuge it would have been, but for this new occurrence, this disastrous letter; incapable of proof in any event, and probably, with the explanation she had given Madame Joubert, exempt even from enquiry. Now, of course, it was very different; beset with risk and hazard. But it was a choice of risks, and this was palpably the lesser, if she acted at once. Let her do so.

One thing was indispensable however: she must enter Léonie's room. For one minute only; that

would be ample time; but she must do this. She approached the door, and listened.

It was late, nearly ten o'clock now. After the few words which had passed between her and Mrs. Ponsonby, Léonie had again thrown herself on the bed; there she had lain the whole evening in a tumult of wild feeling. Once, the instinct of self-preservation made her rise and attempt to bolt the door on her own side, but the state of the fastening, as already mentioned, made this impossible. It occurred to her to pile the furniture against the door, but this could not be done without sound, and Léonie's pride forbade it. It seemed impossible, whatever Mrs. Ponsonby's object might be in thus confining her, that any actual violence could be intended; she would not give her jailers the triumph of knowing that she was afraid of them, mean and cowardly as they were! She desisted from her purpose accordingly.

Notwithstanding her omission of other precautions, however, Léonie had intended to keep herself awake during the night. She did not lie down again, but lighted a candle, and, taking a book, endeavoured to fix her attention upon it.

But nature was worn out. The agitating occurrences of the day, and the want of food, which she had not tasted since the morning, proved too exhausting. After some ineffectual struggles, Léonie's head dropped forward on her chest, and she fell into a profound slumber.

Mrs. Ponsonby, whose faculties were strained to the uttermost, soon discovered this fact by the

sleeper's regular breathing. Carefully unclosing the door, she found her surmises confirmed: Léonie was wholly unconscious of her presence. Then she proceeded to dispatch the errand on which she had come.

The saloon stove of which mention has been already made, had its vent, as is usually the case to avoid disfiguring the main apartment, by a pipe carried through the wall into an adjoining room;—the small bedroom occupied by Léonie. Here, the vent was connected with another upright pipe, which again passed through the ceiling of the bedroom and the tiling above it, carrying the noxious fumes of the charcoal consumed into the open air. At the connecting point, or elbow, as it is termed, of the two pipes, and inserted into the lower of the two, was a closely-fitting metal trap, with a hinge capable of being opened for the purpose of cleaning both pipes when required.

Closely-fitting, in one sense;—when the trap, or mouthpiece of metal we have been describing, was in its place, it effectually covered the opening over which it lay, preventing the escape of the vapour in any but the most trifling quantities.

But the trap was not always in its place. Not certain of being so, that is; it would take a very little to make it, at any moment, drop out of it! The work was old; and the pin by which this moveable piece was secured was worn and rusted. Any jar in the room, even the mere closing of a door, might unfasten it. The trap would then drop, hanging by its hinges, and the vapour would pass into the bedroom.

And assuming the upper, or vertical pipe, to be at the same time closed against its egress that way, the whole of the vapour would so pass!

A veritable friend in need!

For weeks past, Mrs. Ponsonby had felt it to be such; had studied its arrangement, the mode of dealing with it, in the event of such need arising; matured her plans in regard to it. She now proceeded to put them into execution.

Tremblingly, but unerringly; less than the stipulated minute sufficed.

Both parts of the task were accomplished. The valve hung down, disclosing an orifice through which the faint odour of the charcoal in the stove was already discernible. Above it, the outlet to the open air was barred; temporarily, and so that the obstacle could be easily removed; but most effectually!

Mrs. Ponsonby reclosed the door of communication; returned to the saloon; seated herself. Then she rose and walked to the stove.

In the corner of the room, near the latter, stood a basket of charcoal for replenishing it; as mentioned in a former chapter, the weather was unusually cold for the time of the year, and the basket was filled to the top.

Mrs. Ponsonby approached it, looking round the room as she did so. Quite alone; quite secure from interruption. The only possible intruder would have been Stephen; but, for this evening at all events, she was safe from even him. He had again drunk copiously at dinner, and had announced his intention of retiring to bed early. He was in fact

by this time, like all the other inmates of the house, sound asleep.

The charcoal was in blocks; a pair of tongs stood near for the purpose of lifting it. Mrs. Ponsonby took up one block, and fed the flame, removing the circular cover of the stove to enable her to do so. It was heavy, and she laid it on one side until she had completed her task. Then she went on adding fuel, the fire coiling up in a red glow round each new piece introduced. She did not feed it rapidly, but block by block, giving the charcoal time thoroughly to ignite.

The stove was full now, or very nearly so; perhaps it would take one piece more. Mrs. Ponsonby went back to the basket to fetch it.

Not quite to the basket: her progress was arrested.

With a sudden, sharp cry of pain she dropped the tongs she was carrying, and, staggering to the foot of the bed, supported herself upon it, clutching some article of furniture which stood near her as she did so.

That frightful seizure again; the "tetanus," as the Cheltenham physician had termed it!

Frequently recurring with more or less severity since the time she had consulted him. But worse this time than she had ever known it. Stiffening out sinew and muscle; pinning her to the bedside; holding her there stark and rigid like a corpse!

Holding her there, now, for some time. There was a clock on the mantel-piece. The hands had stood at ten, or nearly so, when Mrs. Ponsonby re-

turned from Léonie's room; the time occupied in feeding the stove, leisurely as she had done it, had been inconsiderable; ten minutes or so, not more. But it was half-past ten now, and yet she was still there; clutched by that grip of iron!

The pain however, although considerable, was not in proportion to the violence of the other symptoms; not so great as to compel her to call for assistance. How far any would have been procurable, she did not consider; there was in fact no necessity for it; and the interruption would have been fatal to her design. The attack would soon pass, and there would be an end of it.

But somehow the attack did not pass.

A quarter to eleven. Eleven. A quarter past; going on for half-past, now, and still no change.

And that "half-past" was the last note of time which Mrs. Ponsonby was able to take. — Both candles suddenly went out!

What, how was this? Darkness? What . . . what had happened to the candles?

Oh! Heaven!

The stove was open all this time! The red light from it, although insufficient to show objects with any minuteness, showed her that.

Where she sat, or rested rather, she could see the embers glowing inside it; see, although dimly, the circular cover lying where she had placed it, on first going to fetch the charcoal!

Yes, indeed. Instead of escaping through the pipe into Léonie's room, the vapour was finding a much readier outlet; it was filling her own. Dark-

ness already. In another half-hour or so, judging by the time it had taken in reaching the candles, it would be—death!

Mrs. Ponsonby tore and struggled with her chained limbs, but they were immoveable; quite stark, quite helpless. No aid, no chance but in her voice!

She did not pause to balance matters now; the cry for deliverance broke from her instinctively; "Léonie! Léonie! Help; help; I am suffocating!"

A cry of wild agony it was, but not a loud one; the utterance seemed choked; already the stifling vapour was beginning, although leisurely enough, to do its work. It was repeated again and again, but it was some minutes before it roused the person to whom it was addressed.

At length Léonie did hear. Starting up in the extremity of her surprise she ran hastily to the door between the two rooms and listened. Still that terrible cry went on, "Léonie, Léonie, help; the stove is uncovered, it is suffocating me; I am in one of these attacks, and cannot move; Léonie, come and help me!"

Vain supplication! Léonie, who rapidly took in what was happening, strove with all her might to force the door open, but ineffectually. It was fast locked;—the key in Mrs. Ponsonby's own pocket.

"Your window!" Mrs. Ponsonby cried in her extremity; "throw it open, call; they will hear you; there is yet time."

Léonie obeyed; her cries for assistance rang over the garden. Audibly enough too, even inside

the house; but no one came. Stephen Ponsonby was stupified with the wine he had taken and slept through everything; the domestic did the same. Madame Joubert heard, but Mrs. Ponsonby had prepared her for this contingency.

"Poor young thing," she said to her daughter, who slept with her, "it is frightful that she should be so afflicted! Were there neighbours, they might to-morrow demand the reason of this disturbance, and the lodgings would suffer. It is well worth always to live detached!"

Léonie paused in her cries at length from sheer exhaustion. "Are they coming?" Mrs. Ponsonby more than once exclaimed frantically.

"I fear not," said Léonie; "I can see or hear no one."

But she was deceived.

On quitting Partenkirch, as mentioned in a previous chapter, Reginald had posted with the utmost expedition to Munich, and reached that place just in time for a train which left at an early hour, and was due in Paris the same evening. Owing to the interruption occasioned by the movements of troops, incessant delays occurred on the journey; and instead of arriving at eight, as it should have done, the train only entered the terminus between ten and eleven. Reginald at first hesitated to proceed to his destination at so late an hour: he had no specific grounds for believing that anything was amiss, and Mrs. Ponsonby, under whose personal charge Léonie was, might resent the intrusion. Something, however, impelled him to do so; and

at length, after much unsuccessful quest in the neighbourhood, the fiacre which he had engaged deposited him at the gate of the house occupied by Mrs. Ponsonby, and the address of which, as already stated, had been telegraphed by Hatty Delacombe to Partenkirch.

By this time it was more than half-past eleven. Reginald, although he had dismissed his vehicle, again felt some doubt whether he ought to present himself for admittance. He was still discussing the question, when to his astonishment no less than consternation, he heard a window on the lower story of the house thrown open, followed by cries for assistance in which he at once recognised Léonie's voice. He called aloud in reply, but in her distress and bewilderment, and being wholly unprepared for his presence anywhere near her, she failed to hear him.

There were others, however, who had heard both sounds. One of the police was speedily attracted to the spot, and his summons brought others; an entrance was effected, and the whole party, with Reginald at their head, hastened to the apartment from which the outcry had proceeded.

They arrived, however, too late for the rescue of the unhappy woman whose guilt had thus been made the instrument of working out her own punishment. The door of the saloon was locked; and during the time occupied in forcing it, the hand of death was already upon her.

She knew it; knew that all hope was over now. In the agony of her remorse she still spoke; she did

not seem to notice the sounds at the door, but addressed Léonie. Implored. Confessed. Excused. Alleged in bar this and that good deed!

But we draw a veil over the details of a scene so terrible.

It is only necessary to add in this place that on hearing Léonie's account of what had taken place, the officers at once proceeded to arrest Stephen Ponsonby as probably implicated in the transaction.

Stephen however was not in his room. Roused at length by the noise made in forcing the door, and fearful of encountering the emissaries of justice, as he rightly judged them to be, he had lowered himself from the window and succeeded in escaping before they entered. It would have been easy, of course, to track him out. There was however no specific charge against him; and as Reginald was unwilling to add to the painful circumstances which had already taken place, a *douceur* from the latter induced the police to forego any active proceeding, and Stephen was left to dispose of his future career as he might think best.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HALF-A-DOZEN pages more, and our story is at an end.

Some months after the tragical occurrence detailed in the last chapter, Sir Reginald Brereton, as he must now be termed, was united to Léonie, and, after a short absence, returned with her to Trecoed, where the ceremony had taken place. He was anxious to become acquainted with the home of his ancestors; and although, in Léonie's mind, Ceniarth was associated with many painful recollections, he made no doubt that time, and her new happiness, would gradually efface them.

Reginald's mother, although pressed by him to take up her residence there, declined to do so. Her pride shrunk from re-appearing on the scene of a misconduct which had led to such disasters, and she preferred settling on the Continent, where her early years had been passed, and where the handsome allowance made her by Reginald insured her the luxuries as well as the comforts of life.

Of other matters at Ceniarth it is unnecessary to speak; although it may be mentioned in passing that the bridge which led from the house to Trecoed village, and which in fact, as well as traditionally, was connected with so much crime and misery, has not been rebuilt. A structure in a more convenient site, lower down the stream, is now substituted for it; and the crumbling piers, over which the ivy has

already began to grow, alone remain to attest the fatal secret of which it is supposed to have been the guardian, but the truth as to which will now never be ascertained.

There is one name however identified with these pages which we must dismiss less summarily.

Percy Delacombe was summoned home from Partenkirch before he had time to do more than make the preliminary arrangements for the memorial cross to Alice referred to in a former chapter. An unexpected accident had thrown in Mr. Delacombe's way an appointment to the first of the new turret-ships, now at length completed and shortly to sail; and Percy, although the estate to which he had succeeded on his cousin's death made him independent of his profession, was yet too much attached to it for its own sake to decline the offer. Within a few weeks from Alice's death he had accordingly joined the ship; and soon afterwards the latter started for her cruise in company with the rest of the squadron.

How that cruise terminated is too well known to need express mention here; we are concerned only with Percy.

On the day of the catastrophe which brought grief to so many English homes, Percy had been hard at work. There were indications of the wind rising, and some anxiety was felt by all on board as to how the ship would behave;—hitherto, since leaving home, there had been exceptionally fine weather, so that this would be her first real trial. Every precaution which was thought requisite was

taken, and Percy, amongst others, was occupied until late in the afternoon in seeing that the orders given were carried out.

In the course of executing them, however, he found time for a few minutes' talk with one of the midshipmen, younger than himself, but to whom Percy was much attached. Some resemblance to his cousin Lennox Marriott had attracted him in the first instance, and this soon led to their becoming intimate friends.

A few minutes' talk only this was; but it is one which will not easily die out of the mind of the survivor of the two persons between whom it passed.

They met on deck, where Percy was unemployed for the time, pending some further directions which he expected. Harcourt, as his friend was named, came up and joined him.

They talked of the probable gale. Of the ship's sailing qualities. Of their companions in the mess-room. Of Harcourt's home:—his father, like Percy's, was the incumbent of a country parish.

"How curious it is to think of them all on shore," said Harcourt; "they know so little of what our life is, and they seem such an immense distance off themselves. Perhaps it is just as well; they might be frightened now and then."

Percy made no immediate reply; when he did speak, it was in a half-musing tone. His companion's words had stirred a train of thought in his own mind, and he could not help pursuing it.

"It is a long distance," he said; "and yet to me

they seem very near us now and then. Do you know, I could almost fancy I hear the Trecoed bells chiming for the afternoon service; one, two, three. One, two, three, they always go on week-days, not the full peal."

"Does your father have service on week-days?" asked Harcourt.

"Yes," said Percy, "morning and afternoon; it would just be about the time now. If I did not know to the contrary, I should say that there he was in front of us, coming round the gravel-path at the end of the church, where my mother's grave is."

"You have lost your mother then?" asked Harcourt.

"Yes," said Percy, "many years since, when I was quite a boy. I remember her, though, and I remember what a grief it was to Papa; he could hardly hold up his head for a long time. Dear old Papa; how I should like to hear his voice again! It is a sad voice, but so kind: it has often kept me from doing wrong, I know, thinking of it."

"I wish I was like you, Delacombe," said his companion.

"I am heartily glad you are not, then," Percy answered.

"No, but you know how I mean; caring about things so."

"What things?"

"Why," said Harcourt, with something of a glow upon his cheek, "saying your prayers, for instance. I know one ought to do so, and I do when I've

turned in; but I could never have the courage to kneel down and say them before all the fellows as you do. I wish I could."

Percy made no reply for a minute. Then he looked away from the speaker, and said, timidly,

"Couldn't you try, Harcourt?"

Harcourt, in his turn, paused before replying. "Well, yes, I will," he said at last; "some time or other."

"Try to-night, old fellow, will you?" said Percy.

"Yes."

Then they parted, Percy's duties summoning him elsewhere.

The wind, meanwhile, had risen as was anticipated. Only a moderate gale, but one which seemed to try the ship a good deal; she leant over unpleasantly, two or three times; once, almost seriously. The Admiral of the squadron happened to be on board, and noticed it; he had been dining with the captain, and now came up on deck to take leave.

"It is all right, I suppose?" he said, addressing his host.

"Oh! yes; we have our instrument to show the limit of safety; we are amply within it."

"Very well; good-day." And the speaker stepped into his boat, which was alongside. The ship was so deep in the water on that side at the moment that he stepped *up* into it!

"It may be all right," he observed in an undertone, as he did so, to the officer in command of the

boat's crew; "I can only say that it passes anything in my own experience!"

An hour later.

The gale still rather heavy, but far from formidable; nothing in it to occasion a moment's uneasiness. The rest of the squadron rode it out with perfect ease.

But the over-weighted turret-ship was less fortunate. There was no warning; no indication of special risk beyond what there had been throughout. But the hand of fate was upon her.

One terrible dip to the water's edge, the spars actually touching it. One moment, still more terrible, during which she might have recovered herself, but did not. Then, all was over!

They lie far enough asunder, Alice and Percy Delacombe! Her head pillowed in that quiet nook of the Bavarian hills; his, deep beneath those heaving waters. Sundered in death: and severed through life by grievous mischance; their day early darkened, their sun gone down while it was yet noon!

But it shall have its rising elsewhere. In the spirit-home of the long-parted; in regions overcast by no shadow, and where error and suffering have passed away!

THE END.

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